

The ABCs of Delighting in God's Word

Psalm 119

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We have before us today what has been described as the Mt. Everest or the Grand Canyon of the Psalms. Think anything that is the biggest of all the biggest and it applies to Psalm 119. If you know anything about Psalm 119, it is likely its size. It is huge. To give you an idea, Psalm 119 all by itself is longer than 30 books of the Bible, nearly half of all the books of the Bible. It is twice as long as any other psalm. One psalm.

This length has been put to good use over the years in the church. For example, George Wishart was the Bishop of Edinburgh. During the religious struggles in ancient England he was sentenced to death. When on the scaffold about to die by hanging he was allowed one psalm to be read before execution. He chose Psalm 119. The length of the psalm was to his advantage for as it was being read in all of its length, a word of pardon arrived and his life was spared.

Psalm 119 has 176 verses. Right now you are thinking, *how long is this sermon going to be?* We can't do all of Psalm 119 in one Sunday message but we can take a tour of it, stopping every once in a while to admire a particularly lovely vista. Psalm 119 has many of them.

A Brief Tour of Psalm 119

There is no author stated for this psalm. Maybe like the Sphinx or Stonehenge, it's best that this masterpiece is anonymous and simply admired on its own merit.

It's called a Torah psalm because it points to the value of the Torah or what we call God's Word. When this was written, the Torah—the first five books of the Bible (Genesis – Deuteronomy) was the "Law." It was their Bible at the time. Five books were all they had. Everything this psalm praises about the Word of God is derived from only the first five books of the Bible. Today we have 61 more including everything about Jesus. Imagine how long this psalm would be if the author had 61 more books of Scripture and the life and ministry of Jesus to celebrate?

This psalm is all about God's Word. Every verse except a few includes at least one reference to God's Word. It is the Torah psalm of all Torah psalms. We began our Psalms series in Psalm 1 which is also a Torah Psalm. Psalm 1, Psalm 19, and Psalm 119 are all Torah Psalms and some think that numeric pattern is intentional by the editors of the Psalms.

The Holy Spirit inspired the psalm writer to organize his psalm according to the Hebrew alphabet. It is a giant acrostic using the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet as the outline. Not only are there 22 sub-chapters for each letter of the alphabet, each verse in the subchapter begins with the letter of its own category.

If this was done in English the outline would be:

A
a
a
a

B
b
b
b

C
c
c
c

The Hebrew letter is the heading; every verse begins with a word starting with that letter. Every section under every letter has eight verses, each with two lines. There is literary and even mathematical symmetry to this psalm.

I like what C.S. Lewis said about this psalm, "It is a pattern, a thing done like embroidery, stitch by stitch, through long, quiet hours, for love of the subject and for the delight in leisurely, disciplined craftsmanship...The Order of the Divine mind, embodied in the Divine Law, is beautiful. What should a man do but try to reproduce it, so far as possible, in his daily life?"¹

Lewis mentions embroidery. I don't know a lot about embroidery but it is little stitches one after another, which taken as a whole, create a pattern or picture of beauty. Psalm 119 uses a two-line, alphabet-following, letter-repeating stitch pattern for 176 verses that when you step back and look at it, is a kind of artwork emphasizing the treasure that is God's Word.

I also find the location of Psalm 119 in the Bible interesting. It is very, very close to being the exact center of the Bible. Is it a *coincidence that **the center of the Bible is about the Bible being the center of us?*** At the virtual center of the Bible is the longest and most artistic of all statements about the Bible being the center of us.

119's words describing God's Word

As I said earlier, nearly every verse of Psalm 119 includes a reference to God's Word. Here are the most common ones explained by the *ESV Study Bible*²:

- *The Law* - Instruction
- *Testimonies* - What God solemnly testifies to be his will
- *Precepts* - What God has appointed to be done
- *Statutes* - What the divine Lawgiver has laid down
- *Commandments* - What God has commanded
- *Rules* - What the divine Judge has ruled to be
- *Word* - What God has spoken

Other translations use slightly different forms of these words. All of them are synonyms of God's revealed word.

A few famous and precious verses in Psalm 119

"I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you." (Psalm 119:11 ESV)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, pp. 58-59.

² Note on Psalm 119, *ESV Study Bible, Personal Size*, p. 1093.

*"Open my eyes, that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law." (Psalm 119:18)*

*"Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path." (Psalm 119:105)*

So far we haven't actually read much of Psalm 119. What do you do with 176 verses? There are 22 sections; we could do one of those, but which one? How could I choose? They are all so good. If you look at Psalm 119 and look at the name of the 2nd section, 2nd letter of the Hebrew alphabet, what does it say? Beth. At Bethel Church, which section should I probably do? Probably Beth, don't you think?

Beth

*How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.
With my whole heart I seek you;
let me not wander from your commandments!
I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you.
Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes!
With my lips I declare
all the rules of your mouth.
In the way of your testimonies I delight
as much as in all riches.
I will meditate on your precepts
and fix my eyes on your ways.
I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word. (Psalm 119:9–16)*

This is what Psalm 119 does for 176 verses. There is no necessarily logical flow between each verse. What binds them together is the acrostic alphabet pattern. Each verse stands alone, but they do so in a tapestry intended to celebrate God's written revelation.

This section begins with a question, *"how can a young man keep his way pure?"* (v.9) This question has led some to speculate that the author of 119 was a young man himself. Does that change your perspective on the psalm? It is possible that this amazing tribute to God's word was composed by a teenager. Hear his or her passion for his own life, *how can I keep my way pure?* Just the question indicates a young life oriented toward the things of God.

Young people, there is nothing keeping you from right now being an example of godly passion for God and his Word. Nothing except a culture all around that pushes you entirely in the opposite direction. Is purity, sexual or otherwise, something our culture encourages? Values? Admires?

If you met me in the front after the service and said, *Pastor Steve, I am so burdened about the direction of my life. I'm really concerned about temptation and my lifestyle. How can I be pure?* The first thing I would say is that your concern itself speaks volumes. Are you concerned about the moral direction of your life? Now is the time! It has been my incredible joy to know the Lord since I was young. How many adults so wish they could have known Jesus as a young person? What a difference following Jesus through their youth would have made in the decisions and directions of their lives! There is forgiveness in Christ for youthful

sins but the earlier you can ask sincerely, *how can I keep my way pure?* the better for your life it is.

What is Psalm 119's answer? *"By guarding it according to your word."* (v.9) Your Word. Whose Word? God's Word. God's Word is a guard for our life. God's Word is his will and when we consciously let it shape the directions and decisions of our lives, it functions as a guard. It is a guardrail that keeps us within God's will and blessing. Think of Daniel who went to Babylon. Talk about a pagan culture. When offered certain foods that went against God's Law, he said no. God's word guarded his life and God blessed him for it.

Students and young people, too often you have no guard, or worse, your heart is guarded according to your friend's word, *But Mom my friend says...*, or your heart is guarded by the lifestyle choices of your heroes in pop culture. Athlete so and so. Singer so and so. Actress so and so. How does that work out for them? Happiness? Joy in life? Not if Linkin Park's lead singer Chester Bennington's recent suicide indicates anything. He is in a long line of cultural heroes who have despaired of life. How can a young person keep their way pure? By guarding it accord to God's word and no one else's.

*"With my whole heart I seek you;
let me not wander from your commandments!
I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you."* (Psalm 119:10-11)

James Montgomery Boice has such a good little outline of verse 11 I have to share it.³ You may know this in the NKJV, *"Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against you."*

*The Best Thing – "Your Word"
Hidden in the Best Place – "my heart"
For the Best Purpose – "that I might not sin against you"*

Isn't that good? What is this talking about? Memorizing Scripture. I'm a big Evernote fan. If you don't know what Evernote is, it's an app that allows you to store digitally anything and everything. It's a powerful program, and I've used it for many years. I have thousands of notes in my notebooks in Evernote. I collect things I read. I'm collecting stuff from our daughters. They draw me something; I take a picture and I store it. I'm storing, storing, storing. That's what Evernote is all about. It's a wonderful program. I would recommend it.

What's so great about Evernote is that once I have my stuff in Evernote, on my phone, I can access my stuff in a split second. It's all stored in the cloud. I can bring it out on a moment's notice. That's kind of what this is saying here. When it comes to God's Word, "storing it up" doesn't mean collecting volumes of Bibles in my attic. It is the placing and the storing of it in my heart and in my consciousness so that like Evernote, I can bring it to mind on a moment's notice. I have to have it in my mind and in my heart if I am going to apply it to my life.

Jesus demonstrated this in his temptation as each time he responds to Satan with Scripture he applies to the temptation. It's no wonder we are often so easily tempted; we don't have God's Word in our hearts and can't draw on it in times of crisis or temptation.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms, Psalms 107-150*, p. 979.

Do you memorize Scripture? What was the last verse you memorized? I need to admit that my personal plan for memorization has been lacking. I learn verses by studying and preparing but not by any serious memorization. I think my weakness has infected the church. A few weeks ago at the Crown Point campus I challenged you to memorize Psalm 1, come on stage, and quote it. In spite of some 2,000 people at this campus that Sunday, we only had 30 or 40 who did it. Why? If you didn't, why not? Yes, there are lots of legitimate reasons but overall ask, does that hint of anything that might be less than Psalm 119?

This is where 119 is so challenging and corrective. His passion for God's Word is intended by the Holy Spirit to say to us, this is how we should think and feel about God's Word. Could you strive to know Scripture, dare I say, memorize it like you know the Cubs' statistics? The lyrics of current songs? The cable TV channel numbers? These we seem to know by heart. Let's love God and his Word and put it in our hearts that we might not sin against him.

This section goes on with verse 14, "*In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.*" Other verses in Psalm 119 say similar things. God's Word is better than gold (v. 127), better than finding treasure (v. 162), better than thousands of pieces of gold and silver (72). God wants us to realize what is really valuable in life. Truth for life. Wisdom for eternity. Precepts that lead to salvation. Words that tell of God and Jesus and eternal life.

"*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?*" (Mark 8:36 ESV) What is real treasure? I suspect we may feel a little convicted on whether we would choose Scripture over dollars, possessions, or status symbols. What about you?

The Beth section and the rest of Psalm 119 summon a response to God's Word.

How Should We Think About/Feel Toward/Respond to God's Word?

Delight (Verses 14, 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174)

"*In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.*" (v.14) This is a genuine joy in God that delights in whatever he has said.

Love (Verses 47, 48, 97, 119, 127, 159, 163, 165)

"*Oh, how I love your law!*" (v. 97)

Say that out loud. "*Oh, how I love your law!*" Did you just make yourself a hypocrite? In a way, all of us are. But this is something to realize about Psalm 119. It is *descriptive* but also *prescriptive*. It functions to call us to be the people we should be. Just like other things do. The Pledge of Allegiance or *America the Beautiful* are quoted and sung regularly to remind us of the citizens we should be even when we aren't or when America isn't particularly beautiful. They act as reminders of what we could be and should be.

Psalm 119 is like *America the Beautiful*. It is idealistic and aspirational. So we read, "*O how I love your law!*" and while that morning we may not feel love and perhaps reading God's Word feels like a duty, it shows us what we could be and what we should be. Let it summon confession, *O how I want to love your law, God please help me!*

Obedience (Verses 3, 4, 10, 21, 29, 32, 36, 44, 59, 88, 112, 115, 145, 146, 166, 167, 168)

In the end, love for God's Word shows itself by reverent obedience. So much of 119 is about obedience. That's how we know if we really love God and his Word, we obey it; live by it.

This week I said to Kiralee one morning, "Sweetheart, I need you to be obedient to Mommy today." She said, "What if I said I'm sorry now for all the times I'm disobedient today?" Really? Pre-planning disobedience? We humans start young with our ability to rationalize away our sins. Psalm 119 doesn't rationalize; it cries out to God for help in walking in his ways, obeying his precepts, living according to his Word.

Delight, love, and obedience to God's Word seem kind of out there to the natural us. *Isn't the Bible an archaic ancient book with morality completely out of touch with modern man and contemporary culture? How can I love it? Delight in it? Obey it?*

Imagine if God had not spoken. What if what if there was no revelation? No word from God about anything? No Bible. No knowledge of God or anything he requires. Think of the moral landscape of the world. Think of the barrenness. The emptiness of the soul if there was no Word, no Christ, even creation somehow silenced about a Creator. Nothing. Just one verse of Scripture would be like a morsel of bread to a starving man. How precious! How we would love that one verse. Memorize it. Meditate on it. Treasure it.

We happen to have a banquet feast in Scripture. Old and New Testament. 66 books. 23,145 verses in the Bible. How do we treasure God's Word? It comes from a heart made alive by the Holy Spirit through the gospel of Jesus Christ. It comes from a true understanding of my depravity and God's unmerited grace to me. It comes from a heart changed through regeneration. A life transformed by Christ and a mind made new. Made alive to spiritual truth. Like the starving man brought to the grocery store. Every aisle is fantastic. You can't get him past the produce. Every item must be tasted, savored, experienced, known.

Apart from God and his revelation, we are the starving man. How does a spiritually starving man respond to spiritual food? Delight! *O how I love your law! How I want it more than gold or silver! I can't eat gold. Silver doesn't satisfy what I need! My soul needs God's truth! Oh how I love your law!*

What should do we do with it? I decided to do my own ABC description of the Christian's life with God's Word.

*Adore it
Believe it
Confess it
Don't ignore it
Enjoy it
Fail, it won't
Give it away
Hope in it
Inspired it is
Jot it down
Keep it close
Love it by livin' it
Memorize it
Need it*

*Obey it
Prioritize time with it
Quote it
Reverence it
Study it
Teach it
Underestimate it at your own peril
Vociferously read it!
Wonder at it
Xerox it and pass it around
Yearn for it
Zeal for God is what it creates in us*

It's no Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is a masterpiece inspired by God that calls the people of God to treasure the Word of God within the community of God.

Oh how we need to love thy law!

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