

1 John 2:28-3:10

David Powlison asks the question,

“when you hear the words ‘Psalm 119,’ what are your first associations?”

There are probably two things that immediately pop into your mind:

- 1) it is *very* long
- 2) it talks incessantly about the word of God

With a little more study a third fact emerges:

Psalm 119 is arranged as an acrostic.

Each stanza has eight verses.

Each of the eight verses in each stanza

begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

That is why most English translations divide the Psalm into 22 stanzas,

with a Hebrew word/letter at the beginning of each stanza:

aleph, beth, gimel, daleth, etc.

Hebrew has 22 letters,

and so the 22 stanzas complete the whole Hebrew language.

And quite frankly this third fact explains the other two.

The reason why Psalm 119 is so long –

and the reason why it talks incessantly about the word of God,

is because we should see that all of human language

from aleph to taw in Hebrew,

and from A to Z in English,

should be employed in extolling the glories of the Word of God.

Many people think that Psalm 119 is simply long and tedious.

By the end of the first stanza I’ve got the point!

God’s law is a good thing.

I should obey God.

Got it.

Why keep going?

David Powlison suggests that what should come to your mind when you hear Psalm 119 is this:

“Psalm 119 is where I go to learn how to open my heart about what matters,
to the person I most trust.

I affirm what I most deeply love.

I express pure delight.

I lay my sufferings and uncertainties on the table.
I cry out in need and shout for joy.
I hear how to be forthright without self-righteousness.
I hear how to be weak without self-pity.
I learn how true honesty talks with God:
 fresh, personal, and direct;
 never formulaic, abstract, or vague.
I hear firsthand how Truth and honesty meet and talk it over.
 This Truth is never denatured, rigid or inhuman.
 This honesty never whines, boasts, rages, or gets defensive.
I leave the conversation nourished by the 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.”
 (David Powlison, *Speaking Truth in Love*, p11)

Psalm 119 is certainly all about the word of God.

Throughout Psalm 119 there are eight Hebrew words used for God’s law.
 These eight words are found in the first eleven verses.

Verse 1 – *torah* (law)
Verse 2 – *edah* (testimonies)
Verse 3 –
Verse 4 – *piqqud* (precepts)
Verse 5 – *choq* (statutes) – also verse 8
Verse 6 – *mitzvah* (commandments) – also verse 10
Verse 7 – *mishpat* (rules)
Verse 9 – *dabar* (word)
Verse 11 – *imrah* (word/saying)

There are only four verses in the entire Psalm that do not use one of these words
 (vv.3, 37, 90, 122)

Each of these 8 words are used at least 19 times in the Psalm.

Why do I mention all this?

Because Psalm 119 is very carefully constructed.

 Each stanza has eight lines.

 Each line in the stanza begins with the same letter.

 And in the poem there are eight words for God’s law.

I want you to see that Psalm 119 is a carefully constructed celebration of God’s law.

But I also want you to see,

 that if all you see in Psalm 119 is a carefully constructed celebration of God’s law,
 you will miss the point of the Psalm.

It is easy to get lost in all the words about God's law.
It is easy to get wrapped up in all the synonyms.
What is the difference between statute and rule? Precept and testimony.

And these eight words for God's law occur more than 170 times in this Psalm.
They *are* very important.

But there is something else that occurs even more often.
There is something that is found in Psalm 119 more than 225 times in the 176 verses.
The suffix *cha* – the 2nd person masculine singular pronoun.

In English, “you.”

And in every instance, the 2nd person masculine singular pronoun refers to Yahweh.

In English, “you” refers to Yahweh 240 times in this Psalm.

Psalm 119 is not a Psalm that you can read quickly.
It is not designed for a quick overview.
Psalm 119 needs to slowly sink into our hearts.
As verse 15 says, “I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways.”
God's word must permeate our being,
so that it becomes the default mode of our lives.

I think that it will take us about ten weeks to get through Psalm 119.
When I first thought about preaching through Psalm 119,
I thought that we could get through it quickly.
But then the text started to suck me in.
It's not quite a story –
but there is movement in the Psalm,
as the Psalmist not only reflects on the beauty of God's word,
but as he wrestles with God – and with his own heart.

As one wise commentator noted,
“Celebration is mingled with cries of anguish and longing for deliverance.”
Today we are going to focus on the first two stanzas,
but as we go through the Psalm we will see that this is Psalm about suffering.

God has promised blessing to the one who walks in his ways (v1-3).
But the Psalmist does not always experience that blessing!
Indeed, Psalm 119:176 will conclude the Psalm with an unfinished note.

“I have gone astray like a lost sheep;
seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments.”

At the very center of the Psalm are stanzas 11-12 (verses 81-88 and 89-96).

There are ten stanzas that lead up to this point,
and ten stanzas that follow.

In stanza 11 (verses 81-88) the Psalmist reaches the depths of his suffering.

He knows that God is faithful,

but he wonders how much longer he will have to take this.

“They have almost made an end of me on earth.”

In stanza 12 (verses 89-96) the Psalmist triumphantly proclaims God’s faithfulness.

“Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.

Your faithfulness endures to all generation.”

And now he speaks as one who has been rescued from the pit:

“If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.”

You might think after this that the rest of Psalm 119 would be all peachy!

Everything is fine now!

God has delivered me!

But it is not.

Psalm 119 has a clear understand of the already and the not yet.

While the Psalmist speaks of how God has delivered him,

he continues to talk about his enemies,

his longing for salvation,

his continual struggle with iniquity.

Psalm 119 is all about the ups and downs of the life of faith.

Psalm 119 is not an exhortation to read your Bible more.

It is a prayer that is rooted in the Word of God.

And we are drawn in to this prayer.

We are looking today at the first two stanzas.

These two stanzas together form something of an introduction to the Psalm.

1. Aleph: “Blessed Are Those Whose Way Is Blameless” (1-8)

Verses 1-3 are addressed to the reader.

The rest of the Psalm (except verse 115) is addressed to God.

So while it is true to say that Psalm 119 extols the glories of the word of God,

it would be even more accurate to say that Psalm 119 extols the glory of God

as he is revealed in his word!

But here in the first three verses

the Psalmist starts by speaking to us.

(v1) Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.

What does it mean to be “blameless”?

Well, think about a few biblical examples:

Noah was said to be “a righteous man, blameless in his generation” (Gen 6:9)

God called Abraham to “walk before me and be blameless.” (Gen 17:1)

Job is said to have been, “blameless and upright,

one who feared God and turned away from evil.” (Job 1:1)

Psalm 37:18 says that “The LORD knows the days of the blameless.”

In the New Testament Paul says in Ephesians 1:4 that God has chosen us to be holy and blameless before him.

And Paul says that his own conduct with the Thessalonians

was “holy, righteous and blameless.” (1 Thessalonians 2:10)

Blameless does not mean someone who never sins.

Rather, the second part of verse 1 helps us understand what blameless means:

who walk in the law of the LORD.

Blamelessness refers to a life that is characterized by fidelity to the law of God.

But in one sense this doesn't help us.

It is all good and fine to say that to be blameless means to walk in the law of the LORD, but what does it mean to walk in the law of the LORD?!!!

In English we tend to think of the word “law” as a synonym for “rule.”

So when we think of the law of the LORD,

we tend to think in terms of a system of rules – of “do's and don't's”

But in Hebrew the word “law” – *torah* –

has a much broader meaning.

Torah can be translated as “law” or “instruction” or “teaching.”

Torah refers to God's direction that he has given us,

showing us the way of life.

The *torah* of the Lord is not just a list of rules to be obeyed.

It is a comprehensive way of life.

The Five Books of Moses are called Torah

because they include the whole pattern of life that God gave to Israel.

So as we go through Psalm 119,

we need to keep in mind that the reason why the Psalmist loves the Torah of the LORD is because it reveals the way of life.

The very heart of the Torah – the ten commandments –

are prefaced with these words,

“I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of bondage.”

God's work of redemption is at the very heart of the Torah.

The way of life is not built upon the foundation of what we do.

The way of life is built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ,

and what he has done in redeeming us from bondage to sin and death.

After all, the Law (the Torah) included both the commands to be obeyed,
and also the sacrifices to be offered in order to deal with sin.

And so I do not think that you will be surprised to hear me say
that Psalm 119 is first and foremost about Jesus.

Because Jesus is the blessed one who has walked blamelessly in the law of the LORD.

And because that is true of Jesus,
it is also true of all those who are united to him by faith.

Verses 2-3 explore this in more detail:

*(v2-3) Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart,
who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.*

Here walking in the law of the LORD is also seen as walking in his ways.

Those who seek the LORD with their whole heart
will do no wrong, but will walk in his ways.

When do you fall into sin?

Have you ever fallen into sin

when you were diligently seeking the LORD with your whole heart?

We need to take seriously Paul's admonition

that "no temptation has seized you that is not common to man.

God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability,

but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape,

that you may be able to endure it." (1 Cor 10:13)

You who are in Christ will never face a situation where you have to sin.

And God promises his blessing to those who keep his testimonies,

who seek him with their whole heart,

who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.

In Christ, you are able not to sin.

Augustine put this most succinctly.

Before the fall, Adam was created in the condition (or estate) of innocence,

but he was able to sin (and he did!).

After the fall, Adam fell into an estate of sin and misery,

where he was not able not to sin (in other words, in Adam we are dead in our sins)

But now our Lord Jesus Christ has brought us out of our fallen condition.

He has brought us into an estate (a condition) of grace,

whereby by his Holy Spirit we are now able not to sin.

(in other words, you do not have to sin anymore!)

Of course, while the dominion of sin has been overthrown,
we have still not been glorified.
Because only in the estate of glory will we be not able to sin.

Psalm 119 will have its penitential moments,
when the Psalmist will acknowledge his sins.
He admits that he is not always blameless.

But Psalm 119 reminds us that God's blessing is upon those who seek him with their whole heart

And when we seek him with our whole heart,
then indeed we are blameless!

Jesus alone is the one who was blameless in every way.
He is the righteous one who could sing Psalm 119 perfectly every day!

But Psalm 119 is the meditation of one whose hope is in Jesus, which is revealed in verses 4-6.

(v4) You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.

The Psalmist now turns to God.

The rest of the Psalm will be a prayer to the LORD.
Some have seen Psalm 119 as a bunch of sentences about the law of God
strung together without much thought.
But if you take the time to pray the Psalm stanza by stanza,
it begins to fit together.
Each stanza has a theme (or, as is often the case, two themes, one in each half).

Here the Psalmist turns his prayer to the LORD and says that you, O LORD,
have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.

You have told me to keep your precepts.
This word has more to do with rules or regulations.
God's rules are not optional.
They were given in order to be obeyed.

God has told you what he expects of you.
And what is more, he has also given you the power to do it.
He has given you his Spirit.
That is why Augustine prayed,
"O Lord, command what you will, and give what you command."
Tell us what you want us to do, and give us the power to do it!

And the Psalmist acknowledges that one of his greatest needs
is to be steadfast in keeping God's statutes.

*(v5-6) Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!
Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.*

What are your eyes fixed on?
What are you gazing at?
Television?
Your computer screen?
Pornography?
The latest fashion trend?

The Psalmist says that when his eyes are fixed on God's commandments,
then he will not be put to shame.

Our culture gives you all sorts of things to gaze at.
The Psalmist knows that all these other things lead to shame.
And he cries out to God, asking that my ways might be steadfast
and my eyes fixed on his commandments.

Stanza one concludes with this future focus:

*I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous rules.
I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me!*

Often we will see Psalm 119 moving back and forth from the present to the future.
The Psalmist pledges himself to a life characterized by fidelity to God's word.
If you will teach me, then I will keep your statutes.

2. Beth: "How Can a Young Man Keep His Way Pure?" (9-16)

And so, with this emphasis on "learning" your righteous rules,
it is not surprising to see the second stanza begin with the young man.
By the end of the Psalm he will be wise and mature.
But here we start at the beginning.

*How can a young man keep his way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.*

Children, listen to this!
And especially you teenagers!

Look at verse 9.
How can you keep your way pure?

How can you avoid the snares of sin and death?
By guarding your way according to God's word.

What does it mean to guard your way?

If you would understand how to guard your way – how to guard your heart –
then keep reading, because verses 10-12 are the answer:

*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.*

If you would know how to keep your way pure,
if you would guard your way according to God's word,
then seek the LORD with all your heart.
Devote yourself diligently to seeking God.

How do you seek him?

In prayer – both when you are alone and together.
And yes, in “storing up” his word in your heart.
Study the scriptures – find delight in talking about these things,
not just as an academic exercise, but as your quest to know the way of life.

And this cannot be a part-time quest.

You cannot say, well, I'll seek the LORD on Mondays and Thursdays,
but I've got to have time for me!
Your quest to seek the LORD with your whole heart
must be the driving force of your daily life.

That is why the Psalmist says,

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.

I know what you have called me to be and to do.

And so the second stanza ends

with the young man prepared to embark upon a life of service to God.

*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.*

For now, he is confident.

He knows the way in which he should walk.
And he delights in that way and declares all the rules of the LORD.

And as he sets forth on the path of life,
he promises:

*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.*

The precepts of God – God’s moral instruction –
will be the focus of his reflection.

We don’t talk much about meditation these days.

The word “meditation” was hijacked in the ‘70s by the Transcendental Meditation crowd.

But meditation means to reflect, to consider, or to muse.

The Psalmist is saying that he will thoughtfully reflect on what God’s precepts say to him.

And his meditation will not be a dull, somber task.

Rather, he says, I will delight in your statutes!

This is the word used in Isaiah 66 to refer to a child being dandled on his mother’s knee.

Think about the way that you held your first child.

That is the way that we should delight in God’s word.

Psalm 119 shows us the way of life.

It shows us how we may walk before him –

how we may talk to him in the most intense and personal way.

Psalm 119 also shows us how to listen to God,

as we meditate on his word, and delight in his statutes.