

Psalm 119:1-8

Making Right Use of God's Word

Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD – v. 1

God's word has been the means to salvation and spiritual growth all the way back to the days of David and beyond. And I say David, because there is a consensus among the older commentators especially that David is the author of this psalm. There are those that believe that this psalm was compiled over many years and that the early verses come from David as a young man and the later verses were compiled when David (or the author, whoever he is) was advanced in years.

The psalm has a primary theme which is the theme of God's word. It becomes very apparent in the course of this psalm that the author has a love for God's word. And such a love, I think it's fair to say, is a love that characterizes every true believer in Christ. It's hard to conceive of a Christian that has no affection for the word of God. And while I recognize that some Christians are given much more to reading than other Christians I don't think that phenomenon can nullify the truth that every Christian, to some degree, has a love for God's word.

It is God's word, after all, that teaches us who and what we are. We learn from God's word that we were created by God, that we sinned against God, that we're rebels against God and are by nature children under God's wrath and curse. We also learn from God's word that God himself is infinite eternal and unchangeable in his being. We learn of his sovereign rule, we learn of his love and grace and how that love and grace has been manifested in the person and work of Christ.

We could not know salvation apart from God's word. It is true that God's word is not the only source of revelation to our souls. The heavens declare the glory of God, the psalmist writes in Ps. 19:1. And we recognize that there is such a thing as natural revelation. God is known, writes Paul to the Romans by the things that are made so that those that have sinned against him are without excuse because they know that he is the Creator and they know that he is the Judge of all the universe. They know that they are accountable to him. So natural revelation does perform a service but natural revelation says nothing about salvation.

We need special revelation to teach us about salvation and the Bible is that special revelation. Only by the Bible do we learn how Christ became a man in order to represent sinners and give his life for them. Only by the Bible do we learn that the price paid to secure our salvation was nothing short of the blood of Christ. This is why we love the word of God. As Christians we owe our eternal destinies to the truth of this book.

Many of you know that this year, 2011, marks the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. The King James, or the Authorized Version, as some refer to it was published initially in the year 1611. There are many books, and blogs, and sermons that are circulating this year in order to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Authorized

Version. Our own seminary conducted a class in which the text, tradition, and transmission of this English version of the Bible is traced. You can find a summary version of that 10 week course on sermonaudio on the site of Geneva Reformed Seminary or you can, for a fee of \$50 audit the entire 10 week course.

It's been much on my mind to conduct some studies in connection with this anniversary but I thought I would do better to broaden the scope of my study so as to include not just one English translation of the Bible but to look instead at what the Scriptures have to say about the Scriptures. You sometimes hear the statement that the Bible is self-authenticating – i.e. It asserts its own authority. It doesn't offer or present itself to man in such a way as to invite the scrutiny of man as to whether or not it is God's word. It comes to us, rather, asserting its claim over our lives or perhaps I should say asserting God's claim over our lives.

I may have more to say about the King James Version in the course of these studies especially as we enter into Reformation month in October but for now I would like for you to see from this longest psalm in the Bible what the Bible says about itself. I do want this to be a practical study. And to that end I want to note not merely from a doctrinal standpoint what the Bible teaches about the Bible, but I want to emphasize in these studies the use that the Christian should make of his Bible.

We, in this country and at this time are more bountifully blessed than we realize to have Bibles. This freedom and this blessing has been with us for so long that I'm afraid we have a tendency to take our blessings for granted. You folks honored me last week by presenting to me a Puritan hard drive. This is a hard drive that has more than 10,000 books on it by great men of the past. I've begun the mammoth task of reading those 10,000 books. I was drawn to some history books about the Reformation in Scotland and I've been reminded in the reading of history how dangerous it was not all that long ago to have a Bible and to read a Bible. We know that William Tyndale was burned at the stake for publishing the Bible in English. Tyndale was one of many that were executed by the church of Rome for daring to possess and read the Bible.

We owe a debt of gratitude to God and to great men of the past for the fact that we can openly carry Bibles with us today and we can and should with grateful hearts read and study and memorize our Bibles. We should feel the same affection toward God's word that the Psalmist in our text felt.

And so I want to focus this morning on the first section of the 119th Psalm. This section is named after the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph. What you cannot see in your English Bibles is that each verse in this section begins with the letter Aleph. And this becomes a repeated pattern throughout the Psalm. So we'll focus on this section today and will go section by section as the Lord leads in the coming weeks. And in the course of this study I want you to be able to answer the question:

How Do We Make Good Use of God's Word?

I. We Make Good Use of God's Word by Utilizing it for Our Cleansing

Notice how the Psalm begins – *Blessed are the undefiled in the way*. The Psalm begins the way the entire book of Psalms begins or the way our Lord's sermon on the mount begins. It begins with a beatitude. A beatitude is a statement that pertains to our happiness. The word *blessed* is often times translated by the word *happy*.

So the Psalm begins with the subject of happiness and immediately we are confronted by a challenge. The challenge is what to do about our defilement. Only those are happy or blessed, you see, that are undefiled. That would seem to put blessing or happiness beyond us because we are by nature defiled.

Listen to Christ's description of how deep and how extensive our defilement runs. He says in Mk. 7:21-23 *For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.*

It's no wonder that Jeremiah calls the heart deceitful and desperately wicked. Our condition is likened by Isaiah to a man who is sick with leprosy from the crown of his head to the soul of his foot. *There is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment* (Isa. 1:6).

Our defilement, then, is permeating. It infects every part of our soul. The meaning of the phrase *total depravity* does not mean that man is as positively wicked and sinful as he can be. The phrase *total depravity* means that every part of man is effected by sin. Your actions are effected – your thoughts are effected – your motives are effected – your affections are effected – your will is effected. Every faculty within your soul was effected by the fall of man and thus we come into this world completely defiled by sin.

But now we have discovered a book that tells us the way to be cleansed. We have a book that holds out to us the sure hope of the cleansing of our defilement. Would you notice what the first verse goes on to say – *Blessed are the undefiled in the way*. To those who know to look for Christ in the Scriptures they would be reminded at once of the words of Christ when he says *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me* (Jn. 14:6).

It is by Christ that we have gained the wonderful blessing of cleansing. The miracles of Christ, you know, find their spiritual counterparts in salvation. So there is a spiritual sense in which you have been healed of spiritual blindness and have gained spiritual sight. You have gained spiritual hearing where you use to be deaf. You have gained spiritual life where you use to be dead. And to the specific point of our text which would correspond to the many instances where Christ cleansed many lepers during his earthly ministry – you have gained spiritual cleansing where you use to be defiled.

So John tells us in his first epistle 1Jn. 1:7 *But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.* What a blessing to be cleansed from sin's defilement. I believe there is something within sinful man that testifies to his need for cleansing. I can remember several years ago reading a book by John Rushdooney called *The Politics of Guilt and Pity*. In that book Rushdooney makes his case for saying that politicians prey upon us by making us feel guilty and then leading us to think that government programs can relieve us of our sense of guilt. He also pointed out that the advertising industry preys upon our internal sense of defilement by promising to us products (soap products in particular) that can make you feel squeaky clean.

And while soap can make you externally clean it can have no effect on the inward defilement of sin. It takes the blood of Christ to cleanse us from sin. The blessing that is promised to us in 1Jn. 1:9 is not only forgiveness of sin but cleansing from all unrighteousness.

And when you think of cleansing you can think of it in two ways. There is our positional cleansing. This is the total and complete cleansing that was accomplished by Christ's atoning death. We are told of Christ in Heb. 1:3 that it was *when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.* This is complete cleansing never to be repeated. Our position before God based on Christ's atonement is the legal position of being cleansed. It was with this cleansing in mind that Christ could say to Peter in Jn. 13:10 *He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean.*

But then we not only have reference in Scripture to our positional cleansing but also to our practical cleansing. This is the cleansing we need day by day and even hour by hour. This is the cleansing we gain by confessing our sins. This is cleansing we gain by coming to Christ continually and applying for fresh cleansing.

The thing I want you to see, now, is that cleansing from both of these perspectives, from the perspective of our positional cleansing and from the perspective of our practical cleansing is ministered to us through the word of God. *Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you,* Christ says in Jn. 15:3. *Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, Paul writes in Eph. 5 and gave himself for it; 26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, 27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*

It is through the word of God, then, that we learn of Christ's willingness and power and authority to cleanse us from sin. It is as the word of God reveals our sins to us and points to God's provision for our sins through the blood of his Son that we gain constant cleansing to our souls. Neglecting time in the word, then, is like neglecting to take a shower when you've been working outdoors in the heat.

Listen to Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians in 2Cor. 7:1. Take this exhortation as God's word to your own soul when he writes: *Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.*

How then do we make good use of God's word? We make good use of it by utilizing it for our cleansing. But would you consider with me next:

II. We Make Good Use of God's Word by Submitting to it as Our Rule

Notice the words of v. 4 *Thou hast commanded [us] to keep thy precepts diligently.* God's precepts come to us with the force of commandments. Recall what I said in my introduction that the word of God does not present itself to us for our scrutiny in order that we may decide for ourselves whether or not it is the word of God. It comes to us, rather, with the authority of *Thus saith the LORD.*

To the sinner who is yet defiled in his sin whose preference is to rule his own life God's precepts are burdensome. But to the person who has gained a new nature through salvation, God's precepts are pure and are desirable. We will see this over and over again throughout the course of the 119th Psalm how the psalmist loves the word of God. That desire is expressed in this first section in v. 5. This verse contains the first petition in the Psalm. Notice what it says – *O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!*

Here is evidence that salvation has been wrought in the soul of a man. He desires God's statutes. He loves God's statutes. He recognizes that God's ways run contrary to the defiling ways of sin and since he has found cleansing from that defilement he has the desire to go in a new and different direction. But he also in his humility sees his own inability to go in this direction apart from help from on high and hence the prayer for that help when he prays *O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!*

Notice with me the second beatitude of the Psalm in v. 2. Not only are they blessed who are undefiled in the way but *Blessed [are] they that keep his testimonies, [and that] seek him with the whole heart.* I think it would be good at this point to point out to you the different designations that we find for God's word or God's law in this Psalm.

No fewer than 9 different terms are used to describe God's word and interestingly enough we find 7 of the 9 terms in this opening section: *The law of the LORD* – v. 1; *His testimonies* – v. 2; *His ways* – v. 3; *Thy precepts* – v. 4; *Thy statutes* – v. 5; *Thy commandments* – v. 6; *Thy righteous judgments* – v. 7.

We'll have occasion to get into the different shades of meaning in these terms in the course of our studies in this Psalm. They all point us to God's word. Let me come back to the second beatitude in v. 2 for now – *Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart.*

Blessed are they that keep his testimonies. When you think of a testimony a couple of things come to mind. When a Christian shares with others how he came to Christ, you sometimes refer to that as the Christian's testimony. He is speaking from the truth of his

experience when he testifies to his salvation. Or you may think of the term from a legal perspective. Before a man takes the stand in a court of law he is called upon to take an oath regarding the testimony that he's about to give. *Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you're about to give will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?*

By bringing these ideas together of the sharing of a Christian's salvation experience and a court of law we can formulate an idea of the meaning of God's testimonies. God can certainly speak from the vantage point of experience and God certainly speaks the truth. In our recent study of the epistle to the Hebrews we noted that God was willing to condescend to take an oath himself with regard to the promises of salvation.

Heb. 6:17,18 *Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.*

We could say, then, that where the testimonies of God are concerned they speak to us of the truth of his Son and they speak to us of the promises of the gospel. God testifies that Christ is his Son and that he is well pleased with his Son. And God confirmed with an oath, swearing by himself that blessing he would bless and multiply the seed of Abraham. We know, of course, that the promises given to Abraham pertained to the promises of the gospel – the promise of life – the promise of heaven – the promise of salvation. God testifies to the reality of the truth of these things.

And when you view God's promises this way then you begin to see the meaning of that second beatitude in Ps. 119:2 *Blessed [are] they that keep his testimonies, [and that] seek him with the whole heart.* This is tantamount to saying that the Christian submits to the gospel of Christ as the rule of his life. And as he walks by the rule of the gospel he walks in the opposite direction of sin. He walks in close communion with God. That's something else we should note with regard to v. 2 – there is a connection between keeping God's testimonies and seeking God with the whole heart. The word of God, the gospel of Christ, the promises of salvation, the testimonies of God – these become the means through which we seek after God and keep in close fellowship with him.

How do we make good use of God's word, then? We make good use of it by utilizing it for our cleansing and we make good use of it by submitting to its rule. Would you consider with me finally:

III. We Make Good Use of God's Word by Aligning Ourselves with Its Aim

What is the aim behind God's word? Why has God given us his word? What does God hope to accomplish in the giving of his word?

The answer to these questions is found in the opening verses of the Psalm. *Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD. 2 Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart.*

The aim behind God's word – his law, his testimonies, his ways – the aim behind them all is our happiness. I know that such thinking runs contrary to the carnal mind and to the unsaved man. The carnal mind sees the word of God as a law that tells him he can't do certain things that he wants to do anyway. The carnal mind sees the law of God as something, therefore, that is restrictive and becomes a form of bondage.

The sinner sees God's laws and God's precepts as rules that take all the fun out of life. God's aim, according to this kind of reasoning, is to make sure that his subjects are miserable as they live as his slaves. The Puritans are often caricatured as those who were of all men most miserable because they of all people in the course of history had respect for God's laws.

Interestingly enough, Phillip Ryken in his book on the Puritans shows how drastically the Puritans are mis-caricatured in our day and that in their own day they were viewed as being the very opposite of the way we're led to believe they were. They were viewed in their own day as being worldly because they saw the good hand of God in the things that brought pleasure. They had the nerve to believe that the intimacy of marriage was a blessing from God rather than a necessary evil for propagating the human race.

I think it would be fair to say that of all people the Puritans were most happy. They were happy because they were free from sin's guilt and sin's dominion. They were happy because they were undefiled in the way. They knew all about the grace of God in salvation. And they knew that the joy of salvation was their strength. So all that they did they did with all their hearts as unto the Lord in the joy of knowing that they were accepted of God in Christ.

And this is God's aim in his word – to bring happiness or blessedness to the soul that will submit to his word. Now if all you see in the word of God are rules invented by God to make you miserable then you'll certainly not find happiness for your life. But God hasn't given us his word with that aim in view. He has given us his word that we might find Christ, and finding Christ we find cleansing from our defilement and we find the ways that are pleasing to God and good for us.

If you would make good use of the word of God, therefore, you must align yourself with the Bible's aim and that aim is your happiness. Let me say again what I touched upon in my previous point and that is that the aim of the Bible is to lead you to God himself. Again the words of v. 2 *Blessed [are] they that keep his testimonies, [and that] seek him with the whole heart.*

Keeping his testimonies and seeking him with the whole heart go hand in hand. The word of God, in other words, has the aim of drawing you to God himself and to Christ. *Search the scriptures* Christ said in Jn. 5:39 *for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.* Christ is the subject of the scriptures. The aim in the scriptures is for the reader to be drawn to Christ. In a statement that applies in particular to John's gospel but could be applied the entire Bible Jn. 20:31 says *But these are written,*

that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.

And when we see that term *life* in such a verse as this we should see in that term all that God intends for us to see. In other words we have eternal life through his name – we have abundant life through his name. We have lives that are free from the defilement of sin through his name. We have lives that are meaningful and that serve God’s purpose through his name.

I hope you can begin to see, then, what bountiful blessings are conveyed to us through the word of God. I hope that in the course of these studies you will fall more in love with God’s word so that you’ll devote yourselves all the more to reading it, studying it, memorizing it, learning to read our titles to heaven more clearly through your understanding of it, communing more intimately with God through it.

If you will devote yourselves to this book then you will come away saying as the Psalmist says *Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD; Blessed are they that keep his testimonies and that seek him with the whole heart.*

May God indeed direct us to keep his statutes. May God help us to align ourselves with the aim of his word that we may know more of the fullness that God intends us to have.