

Loving God & His Word

Psalm 119

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Introduction: The Longest Psalm: Structure

We come this morning to Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the Bible. At 176 verses, Psalm 119 is longer than 30 of the 66 books of the Bible. The second longest psalm, Psalm 78, has 72 verses.

Psalm 119 is an extended alphabetic acrostic poem. It has 22 stanzas, or strophes, made up of 8 verses each. Within each stanza, every verse begins with the same Hebrew letter, starting with *Aleph* in Stanza 1 and then *Beth* in stanza 2 and so on, all the way to the end of the Hebrew alphabet. You can see that reflected in the headings for the stanzas in your English Bible. Psalm 119 is very similar to Psalms 111 & 112, which we studied a few weeks ago, which are also alphabetic acrostics, although they are only 22 verses long, with just one verse per letter, so they're each exactly 1/8th the length of Psalm 119.

We don't know who wrote Psalm 119, just as we don't know who wrote Psalms 111 & 112. They may all have been written after the exile, when the book of Psalms was being compiled for use in corporate worship. Some people have suggested that Ezra the priest may have written Psalm 119, and if he did, he may have written all three of these alphabetic acrostics. Certainly, Ezra is a good candidate for the authorship of these psalms, as he was a priest, a scribe and a teacher of the law, so he was very devoted to God's word. Also, the expression in verse 57, "The Lord is my portion" may indicate that the author was a priest, someone who got their portion from the Lord in the Temple service.

Psalm 119 opens with familiar words, "*Blessed are . . .*" Thus, the opening of Psalm 119 is very similar to the openings of Psalms 1 & 112, both of which we studied this summer. It's worth taking a moment to compare these openings, as it ties together one of the major themes from the psalms we've looked at this summer:

Psalm 1:1-2:

*"Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night."*

Psalm 112: 1:

*"Praise the LORD!
Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
who greatly delights in his commandments!"*

Psalm 119:1-2:

*"Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD!"*

*Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their whole heart”*

Clearly, all three of these psalms are closely related, pronouncing to us the blessedness of delighting in the Law of the Lord and of walking in His ways and not in the ways of the world. The theme which is begun in Psalm 1 is further unpacked in Psalm 112 and even further unpacked in Psalm 119.

But what Psalm 119 is, in contrast to Psalms 1 & 112, is a prayer. After the opening lines pronounce the blessing of God for those who walk in His ways, according to His law, the rest of the psalm is addressed to God and is an extended prayer which asks God to enable the psalmist to walk in the law of the Lord. This prayer opens with “*Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!*” and it ends with:

*Let my soul live and praise you,
and let your rules help me.
I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant,
for I do not forget your commandments. (vv. 175-176)*

While Psalm 119 is very long, it takes less than 20 minutes to read. The audio version on my Bible app takes 17 minutes to read Psalm 119. It is a beautiful, powerful psalm, and I strongly encourage you to find 20 minutes this afternoon to sit and read this whole psalm.

A. Loving God & His Commands

At the heart of Psalm 119 is a man who obviously loves the Lord and His Law, His commands. In the first seven verses, each beginning with the same letter, aleph, the psalmist uses seven different terms for the Law of God. In fact, 173 of the 176 verses in this psalm use one of nine different terms for God’s word. The psalm uses a general term for “word” 24 times, and then it uses 8 specific terms: seven terms for the law of God and one term for the promises of God. Here are the seven terms for God’s law: law, testimonies, ways, precepts, statutes, commandments and rules. These are many of the same terms that were used for God’s Law in Psalm 19, and we discussed most of them then.

The broadest term, “law,” is the Hebrew word “Torah,” used 25 times. This refers to all of God’s teachings, things God reveals about Himself as well as what He instructs us to do. So, everything we are to know and believe about God and everything God requires of us are all summed up in this word “Torah.”

The word “testimonies” is used 23 times and refers to the Ten Commandments, and it tells us that God’s law is a witness of the covenant relationship between God and His people, that He is our God and we are His people. The law stands as a testimony of that covenant relationship.

The word “ways” is used 13 times and reflects the truth that God’s law reveals God’s character and shows us how we are to walk, or live, in our lives.

The word “precepts” is used 21 times and refers to the principles contained in God’s law – that which is a properly appointed mandate.

The word “statutes” is used 22 times and refers to the statutory law of God, like the decrees of a king, saying what we should and should not be doing as His people.

The word “commandments” is also used 22 times and emphasizes the authority of God, the things appointed by God to be kept based on His authority as God.

The “rules” of God could also be translated “judgments” and is used 23 times, referring to the legal decisions – like case law or “rulings” – of God as the judge.

While many of these seven terms are synonyms of each other and they all overlap in meaning, the use of seven different terms shows us that there is great variety in God’s law and that His law is divinely complete. Two aspects of God’s law are highlighted in Psalm 119 – its beauty, or majesty, and its benefits, or blessings:

1. The Beauty of God’s Commands

God’s law is desirable, delightful, wonderful. It is worth longing for, meditating on, delighting in, pondering and proclaiming. God is good and His law is excellent and praiseworthy, as it reflects His character:

*“In the way of your testimonies I delight
as much as in all riches.” – v. 14*

*“Open my eyes, that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law.” – v. 18*

*“My soul is consumed with longing
for your rules at all times.” – v. 20*

*“Your testimonies are my delight;
they are my counselors.” – v. 24*

*“I will also speak of your testimonies before kings
and shall not be put to shame,
for I find my delight in your commandments,
which I love.” – vv. 46-47*

*“The law of your mouth is better to me
than thousands of gold and silver pieces.” – v. 72*

2. The Benefits of God’s Commands

As we meditate on God’s Law and His Spirit writes it on our hearts, we reap benefits from the Law of God. Psalm 119 highlights how God’s law gives us great wisdom and understanding, teaching us to love what is good and hate what is evil:

*“Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is ever with me.
I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your testimonies are my meditation.
I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.” – vv. 98-100*

*“Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.” – v. 104*

B. Loving God & His Promise

While Psalm 119 uses seven terms for the law of God, it uses one term for the promises of God, which is used 19 times. The first place this word is used in in verse 11, where it is translated as “word” instead of promise:

*I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you. – v. 11*

In Psalm 119, the promise of God is seen as our source of life and hope:

*“Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD,
your salvation according to your promise;” – v. 41*

“This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.” – v. 50

*“Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live,
and let me not be put to shame in my hope!” – v. 116*

“Plead my cause and redeem me; give me life according to your promise!” – v. 154

Just as Psalm 119 highlights the beauty and benefits of God’s Law, it highlights the graciousness of God’s promise and expresses gratitude for God’s promise:

1. The Graciousness of God’s Promise

God’s promises are associated with His grace, His steadfast love and His mercy.

*“I entreat your favor with all my heart;
be gracious to me according to your promise.” – v. 58*

*“Let your steadfast love comfort me
according to your promise to your servant.
Let your mercy come to me, that I may live;
for your law is my delight.” – vv. 76-77*

2. Gratitude for God’s Promise

The Psalmist is grateful for all of God’s word, for His Law and His promise. He knows He needs Law and Gospel, guidance and grace, wisdom and mercy, rules and redemption:

*Your promise is well tried,
and your servant loves it. – v. 140*

The psalmist could express His great love for God's promise because He knew from experience that God's promise is reliable.

*I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I hope in your words.
My eyes are awake before the watches of the night,
that I may meditate on your promise. – vv. 147-148*

When the psalmist was in distress and crying to God for help in the night, he found hope in God's words and would meditate on God's promise in the watches of the night.

C. Loving God in Suffering

Throughout Psalm 119, the primary theme is the word of God and the secondary theme is suffering in the life of God's servant. In other words, the beauty, benefit and graciousness of the word of God is set against the constant backdrop of suffering in the life of the psalmist.

I. Suffering Because of the Wicked

The suffering the psalmist experiences is at the hands of the wicked, those who oppose God and His ways. The wicked do attack the psalmist and plot against him, but he is even more disturbed by the fact that the wicked have rejected God and His ways and mock God. The psalmist's passion for God often shows itself in a passion against those who hate God and often in a resolve not to allow the wicked to distract or derail him from God's word:

*“Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked,
who forsake your law.” - v. 53*

*“I hate the double-minded,
but I love your law.” – v. 113*

*“The insolent smear me with lies,
but with my whole heart I keep your precepts” – v. 69*

*“Let the insolent be put to shame,
because they have wronged me with falsehood;
as for me, I will meditate on your precepts.” – v. 79*

*“The wicked lie in wait to destroy me,
but I consider your testimonies.” – v. 95*

*“The wicked have laid a snare for me,
but I do not stray from your precepts.” – v. 110*

2. Suffering in Affliction

Even though the psalmist's suffering comes from the wicked, He has learned to see it as coming from the Lord as discipline, training and instruction:

*“Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I keep your word.” – v. 67*

*“It is good for me that I was afflicted,
that I might learn your statutes.” – v. 71*

The psalmist has learned to praise God, even for His affliction:

*“I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous,
and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.” – v. 75*

This is not to say that the psalmist enjoys his affliction. He doesn't. He still cries out for deliverance from it, and he finds hope in God's word in the midst of it:

*“If your law had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my affliction.” – v. 92*

*“I am severely afflicted;
give me life, O LORD, according to your word!” – v. 107*

*“Look on my affliction and deliver me,
for I do not forget your law.” – v. 153*

D. Longing for God in Every Season

The passionate tone of Psalm 119 is really very remarkable and powerful. Considering this is a highly structured poem dealing with the Law of God, we might expect it to be technical and calculated, but instead it pulses with a passion that is strong and clear from beginning to end.

I. Pleading with God

Throughout Psalm 119, the psalmist is pleading with God, begging Him to act. One whole stanza, He, vv. 33-40, is dedicated to pleading with God:

*Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes;
and I will keep it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.
Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.
Incline my heart to your testimonies,
and not to selfish gain!*

*Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things;
and give me life in your ways.
Confirm to your servant your promise,
that you may be feared.
Turn away the reproach that I dread,
for your rules are good.
Behold, I long for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life!*

The connection between this stanza and the one which follows shows some of the strongest logical progression in his lengthy psalm. Since Psalm 119 is an extended alphabetic acrostic, its order is constrained by the alphabetical structure and less by logical sequence. But at times the flow between lines and stanzas is more ordered by logic. “He” and “Vav” (vv. 33-48) are a good example of this.

In “He,” the psalmist makes it very clear that He needs God to teach him, lead him, and to turn his heart and his eyes toward God.

If we are to understand God’s law, He must teach us. If we are to walk in God’s law, He must lead us. If we are to focus on God’s law, He must turn our eyes. If we are to truly delight in God’s law, He must incline our hearts. We need God from beginning to end and in every aspect of our walk with Him – for our heads, for our hearts, for our eyes, for our feet.

2. Pleasing God

Right after the “He” stanza of pleading with God, the “Vav” stanza (41-48) is dominated by personal resolve, especially in verses 44-48:

- I will keep your law.
- I will speak of your testimonies.
- I will lift up my hands.
- I will meditate on your statutes.

Here, the psalmist is committing himself to obedience, evangelism, worship and Bible study – living life for the Lord.

The hinge between these two sections comes at the end of He and the beginning of Vav, vv. 40-43:

*Behold, I long for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life!
Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD,
your salvation according to your promise;
then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me,
for I trust in your word.
And take not the word of truth utterly out of my mouth,
for my hope is in your rules. – vv. 40-43*

So, the overall flow of these stanzas within Psalm 119 shows us this pattern:

1. We learn the truth about God and His ways and resolve to follow Him. (Aleph – Beth, vv. 1-16)
2. We suffer affliction and experience sorrow. (Gimel – Daleth, vv. 17-32)
3. We seek the Lord and plead with Him to help us, teach us, direct us. (He, 33-40)
4. We resolve, by God’s grace, based on His work in us, to live our lives for Him. (Vav, 41-48)

So there is a general kind of flow, within the limits of an alphabetic acrostic. And the flow seems to mirror what we read of the life of faith elsewhere in Scripture. It reminds me of Philippians 2:12-13:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

God works in us and we work out what He works in. God saves us, inside and out, and we walk in the salvation He has given. This is the pattern I see reflected throughout Psalm 119. We can see this in two of those key “hinge” verses that drive home this pattern of pleading with God to enable us to please God:

*“I will run in the way of your commandments
when you enlarge my heart!” – v. 32*

*“In your steadfast love give me life,
that I may keep the testimonies of your mouth.” – v. 88*

3. Praising God

While Psalm 119 is an extended prayer and is full of pleading with God and a longing to please God, the psalmist also spends large portions of his prayer praising God. Two full stanzas – Mem (vv. 97-104) and Sin & Shin (vv. 161- 168) – contain no petitions, no requests, but they are full of praise to God. But the praise of God is not limited to these two stanzas either:

*“Forever, O LORD, your word
is firmly fixed in the heavens.
Your faithfulness endures to all generations;
you have established the earth, and it stands fast.” – vv. 89-90*

*“I have seen a limit to all perfection,
but your commandment is exceedingly broad.
Oh how I love your law!
It is my meditation all the day.” – vv. 96-97*

*“Seven times a day I praise you
for your righteous rules.
Great peace have those who love your law;
nothing can make them stumble.
I hope for your salvation, O LORD,
and I do your commandments.
My soul keeps your testimonies;
I love them exceedingly.” – vv. 164-167*

Conclusion: Living Our Lives Loving the Lord

We've only had time this morning to scratch the surface of Psalm 119, to get a birds-eye view of this majestic psalm. It reminds me of the flight I took to China in 1997, when we flew past the mountains of Alaska. The view was beautiful and stunning, but it left me hungry for a closer, longer look. I hope you will take the time this afternoon and this week for a closer, longer look, but Psalm 119 is so long and complex and beautiful that you can look at it for the rest of your life and still see new things.

For me, this past week, I was struck by how Psalm 119 lays out for us a pattern for living our lives loving the Lord. I always knew Psalm 119 as a love-song for God's law, but I was struck this week by the example it gives us of God-ward living, of living life before the face of God and unto the glory of God out of love for God.

In desiring to keep God's law, the psalmist's desire is not to just be righteous for his own sake, but his desire is to please God. In other words, the passion in Psalm 119 makes it clear that God's Law is not a list of rules or dos and don'ts or just a way to be smart or successful. God's Law reflects God's heart and character. The true heart of keeping the Law is loving and pleasing God.

The closing verses of Psalm 119 reflect this desire to please God, a longing for God, for His salvation and the life for his soul that God alone can give:

*I long for your salvation, O LORD,
and your law is my delight.
Let my soul live and praise you,
and let your rules help me.
I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant,
for I do not forget your commandments. -vv. 174-176*