

By Dr. Kenneth Gore, Professor of Biblical Studies, Dallas Baptist University

Lesson Nine: Walking Blamelessly

Focal Text: Psalm 119:1-16

Background: Deuteronomy 6:4-6; Matthew 6:19-21

Main Idea: Studying, meditating, and following God's word helps me to love God and others.

Question to Explore: How do I meditate on God's word and treasure it in my heart?

Quick Read: Those who seek to follow the Lord will treasure God's word in their heart.

Introduction

Recitation is often a key component of education. In grade school, students learn their "ABCs" and "123s," and they memorize the colors of the spectrum. Later in their education, they study "times tables" and classic poems. Each of these recitations creates a foundation of memory that is hard to lose even as people age. Individuals in their nineties, who may not remember what they ate for breakfast, will be able to quote from memory a poem or song that they learned in school. Once these items stick in the brain, it is hard for the brain to let go of them.

For young Christians, Scripture memory has often been an important part of discipleship. It allows believers to remember Bible verses at the most opportune time, and such memory allows a deep love and admiration for the Bible and the God who gave it to them. More than the verse itself, such an exercise allows believers to use the Scriptures well. It provides comfort and peace of mind, whether in good times in life or in difficult ones.

Often at funerals, ministers will read Psalm 23. While reading it, members of the audience will mouth the words. Such recitation at that moment provides comfort to those in attendance, and it allows everyone to recognize how powerful the remembered, verbal recitation of the Bible can be.

Psalm 119 is a powerful ode to memorizing God's Word. It is a song about the benefits of learning God's Word, and it provides the reader with the opportunity to seek the joys of God's Law as well. Because it is so long, readers sometimes rush through it due to its length and repeated themes, the psalm should not be avoided. Instead, careful reading will allow the reader to gain great benefits.

Commentary

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Psalm 119 is overlooked or avoided completely by many scholars. Commentaries have not been helpful in this viewpoint, often calling the psalm empty and “artificial.”¹ However, once the initial and overwhelming shock of a 176-verse psalm subsides, working through the psalm is doable, and it can be thought of as nothing short of a literary masterpiece.

English readers of Psalm 119 often remark on two items as they first encounter it: 1) its immense size, and 2) the twenty-two Hebrew headings found in their Bible. Recognizing the construction of the psalm aids in understanding its beauty and its complexity. The psalm is divided into 22 sections, or strophes, each one representing a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each section is eight verses long, and each verse within a section begins with the same letter. For example, verses 1-8 are in the Aleph section. Each verse begins with the Hebrew letter Aleph. Verses 9-16 are in the Beth section, verses 17-24 in the Gimel section, and so on. This goes on throughout the entire alphabet until it ends at the final Hebrew letter Tav (ת).

Why did the psalmist do this? It appears that this was the writer’s attempt to show how important the “Law” is from A to Z, how all of life is ordered by God’s Word. By “Law,” the term can refer to at least three possible meanings. First, it may refer to the commandments of God (often tabulated at 613 different directives). Second, it might refer to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Pentateuch. Third, it can refer to the general instruction and counsel of God.² By writing in this fashion, the psalmist promoted the importance and power of knowing God’s Law, how it benefitted him, and how it would also help his readers.

Acrostic psalms are scattered throughout the Book of Psalms (9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, and 145). In addition to the book of Psalms, there is also an acrostic in the book of Proverbs pertaining to the “woman of noble character” (Prov. 31:10-31), as well as four of the five chapters of Lamentations.

While it is unclear why acrostic psalms were used, there appear to be three possibilities. First, it served as an artistic device. Such a pattern produces an aesthetically pleasing poem. Second, it served as a mnemonic device, providing a way for young students to memorize large passages of poetry. Third, it was a sign of completeness for the subject at hand, for it provided an “everything from A to Z” style about it.³ Perhaps some, if not all, of these reasons were employed in Psalm 119.

Traditionally, acrostic psalms have been known as “wisdom psalms,” in that they serve as a guide to knowing the Lord. In the case of Psalm 119, it could also be known as a psalm of “torah piety,”⁴ in that it celebrates the Word of God in ways that few other psalms have done. However, the psalmist did not praise the Torah for its own sake; instead, he gave praise to the Torah because it was given to them by God Himself.

In addition to its external construction, there are 8 different words that are used throughout the psalm to describe the instruction of God:

- Law (*torah*), used 25 times
- Statute (*'edut*), used 23 times
- Law (*mishpat*) used 23 times
- Decree (*hoq*), used 22 times
- Word (*dabar*), used 22 times
- Commandment (*mitsvah*), used 22 times
- Precept (*piqqud*), used 21 times
- Word (*immah*), used 19 times.⁵

In all, the words are used 88 times in the first 11 sections of the psalm, and 88 times in the second 11 sections.⁶ Except for verses 3, 37, 90, and 122, every verse of Psalm 119 contains one of these eight terms! To say that there is a pattern here is an understatement!⁷

This lesson examines the first two strophes of the psalm, Aleph (vv. 1-8) and Beth (vv. 9-16). Although these sections could be subdivided further, this lesson will elaborate within the two sections.

Aleph: The Joy of Following God's Word (vv. 1-8)

The first section, Aleph, sets the stage for the entire psalm. It is a preamble of sorts, in that it paints a picture of what a person who is bound to the instruction of God should look like. Verses 1-4 highlight what God's followers should be.

Verses one and two begin with the term *ashre*. Traditionally, translators have used "blessed" for this word. It is a sign of beatitude, meaning "happy." Similar to Psalm 1, the writer shared that those who followed the Law of the Lord would be ones who were blameless.⁸ If they would seek the Lord with all of their heart, and walk in the ways of the Lord, they would "do no wrong" (v. 3).⁹ Rather than insinuating that a person could not sin, it is poetic license to show that one would live a more righteous life if they followed the Lord's words. Verse four emphatically notes that God's commands are meant to be kept. They are not suggestions but instead are part of the relationship that followers of God have with their Lord.

In verses 5-8, the psalmist longed to be the type of person he so espoused in verses 1-4. He wanted his ways to be steadfast, so he could keep God's decrees; if he could only do so, he would not be "put to shame" when he considered God's commandments (v. 5). Although he did not explain what he meant, it sounds as though such a task was on his heart and mind at the time. This inner struggle was something that his readers could easily relate to: how could disciples hold on to their beliefs and stay steadfast to God, in the way that God and His commands were steadfast to them?

His response in verses 7-8 is the “challenge cycle” that would continue throughout his life. He would praise God with an upright heart as he learned (“considered”) God’s commands. As he learned them, he was willing to obey them. This constant, cyclical habit of learning and obeying God’s Law strove him to learn even more. In this habitual process, he asked God not to forsake him (v. 8). It is this plea that brings the strophe back to where it began: a “blameless life” (v. 1).

Verses 1-4, then, are more proverbial in scope; these verses describe the benefits of following God’s Law. Verses 5-8 describe the poet’s depiction of his habitual cycle of learning them and obeying them, in the hope that he will be steadfast in all his ways. As he strove to be steadfast, he hoped that God would remain steadfast with him.

Beth: A Personal Walk in God’s Word (vv. 9-16)

While verses 1-4 of the psalm were more general in nature, and verses 5-8 grew more personal in style, verses 9-16 grew even more personal. In each verse, the poet referred to God in the second person (“you,” “your”). To the psalmist, this is not some deistic God who is far away; this is a God who is close, in whom he is able to commune.

In verse 9,¹⁰ the writer asked a rhetorical question: “How can a young person stay on the path of purity?” Without hesitation, he answered his own question: “By living according to your word.” “Keeping” (lit., “guarding”) is the idea of staying close to it and not leaving it. By holding on to the words of God and not letting go, he would stay pure.¹¹

To perhaps remind himself of his plan to keep God’s Word, the writer focused upon two items that would help him. First, he sought God with all his heart; in doing so, he asked not to stray from God’s commands (v. 10). Second, he had hidden God’s word in his heart so that he would not sin against him (v. 11). The psalmist in these two verses shows that his objective in verse 9 was not merely an adage, but it was also a way of life. By focusing his attention on his relationship with God, he strove to live how God had asked him to live. There could be no obedience without relationship. By following God completely, he would then follow God’s command.

In verse 12, the psalmist praised the Lord. While this phrasing is unique to the psalm (used nowhere else in the psalm but here), it is still a personal address, as he invited God to teach him the commands. Verse 13 becomes more intimate, as the psalmist declared that he was muttering all the very commands that came from God’s mouth. It is as if he sat across a table from God himself, personally learning the commandments from God. To him, these words were not moldy law codes that had no vitality. On the contrary, they were living words from God Himself.

The very words of God’s law had become a part of his life. He delighted in God’s law more than one would when receiving great wealth. This is reminiscent of the comparisons of God’s statutes found in Psalm 19. These very words would be meditated upon (v. 15) and delighted in (v. 16).

When the psalmist exclaimed, “I will not neglect (=forget) your word,” the strophe came full circle. Because he would not forget God’s word, he was willing to keep his way pure (v. 9).¹²

Conclusion

Apart from its overwhelming length, perhaps one of the reasons that Psalm 119 often gets unread is that some believe it favors a legalistic understanding of God. However, in just the 16 verses that this lesson has explored, the psalm proves otherwise.

Readers often forget that the reason God gave His instructions to His followers was out of love. God cared for how they lived and behaved, and He wanted them to remember that their behavior reflected who they were.

Although the psalm emphasizes the words and commands of God, they are not emphasized for their own sake; instead, they are always attached to the covenant. Without a relationship, there would be no reason for God’s laws. Even at the beginning of the Ten Commandments, God said to them, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). There was no reason to follow these laws unless there was first a relationship with God.

What the psalm emphasizes more than the Law is the relationship that the psalmist had with the God of the Law. He knew this God. He listened to him. He mouthed the very words that God had uttered. This would be an essential reason for him to follow the words of God. Believers do not follow God’s words to enter a relationship with Him; instead, they do so *because* they are in a relationship with Him.

Yet, how can one become steadfast with God and His Word? The answer lies in God’s message to them: “Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). How does one become holy like God? The only way is to spend time with God.

Sociologists have noticed that couples who have been together for many decades will “reflect” each other. They will finish each other’s sentences. They will laugh at each other’s jokes. They will have the same “wavelength” of thought. And at times they may begin to look like one another. Called “mirroring,” it is when one person acts like the one that they are closest to.

The only way individuals become holy like God is for them to spend time with Him. They will learn who God is, and what God desires. They will begin to understand what he wants. And, similarly, like Moses, they will become “radiant” because they have been in His presence (Exodus 34:34-35; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18).

Psalm 119 shows that, truly the way to live according to God’s will is to invest time with God. It will then cycle around to living the way God desires, which in turn will cause them to be steadfast. In essence, it is the way to live a holy life in the Lord, and it will prepare them for what lies ahead.

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The earlier a person learns this fundamental truth and puts it into memory, the longer the person will hold on to it.

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1. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 739. Perhaps more astonishing than Weiser's quote is that he only commented on Psalm 119 for just two pages!
 2. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 169. They note two other possible definitions, but they relate to the New Testament understanding of the term.
 3. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 19 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 129.
 4. W. Dennis Tucker Jr. and Jamie A. Grant, *Psalms*, vol. 2, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 703; Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 256.
 5. The total number of these terms comes from Tucker and Grant, 702. Rather than thinking of each of these terms as a varied nuance of God's instruction, it is probably best to think of all of them as synonymous with *tôrâ*. For a different view, see Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 453–54.
 6. Stated in Tucker and Grant, 703. This author, however, adds the grand total number of times to 177, not 176, thus providing an extra "instruction" somewhere. Others have noted this as well. See Hossfeld and Zenger, 259; David Noel Freedman, "The Structure of Psalm 119," in David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz, eds., *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 725–56.
 7. Hossfeld and Zenger, 257–58, believe that there may be a further pattern in the psalm related to the number eight (or "7 + 1"). The number eight has several symbolic meanings within the Old Testament, particularly in the Torah (Pentateuch). Some examples include: the seven days of creation plus a new beginning; circumcision took place on the eighth day; and the presentation of the first fruits on the eighth day.
 8. The word used here refers more to the idea of "completeness" or "wholeness." See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 1071.

9. Verse 3 is one of the few verses within Psalm 119 that does not use a synonym for “instruction.” However, it does use the term “way” (*derek*), which has a similar understanding. See Tucker and Grant, 703.

10. Hossfeld and Zenger, 261, note that there is a connection (chiasm) between verses 8–9 and verses 7–8 (thus connecting the two strophes). Verses 7–8 use the words “heart” and “keep,” while verses 9–10 use the words “keep” and “heart.”

11. Hossfeld and Zenger, 266.

12. A chiasm concludes the strophe in verse 16:

Statutes—A
 Delight—B
 Not forget—B'
 Word—A'