

Truth Talk Truth Talk

Psalm 119 – The Word for Life!

Our Heart's True Desire

Stanza 13 – Verses 97-104

(Part 2)

Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.⁹⁸ You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; For they are ever with me.⁹⁹ I have more understanding than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation.¹⁰⁰ I understand more than the ancients, Because I keep Your precepts.¹⁰¹ I have restrained my feet from every evil way, That I may keep Your word.¹⁰² I have not departed from Your judgments, For You Yourself have taught me.¹⁰³ How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth!¹⁰⁴ Through Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way.

In the previous edition of Truth Talk we began exploring the amazing claim made by the Psalmist regarding his deep, passionate, unshakeable love for God's Word. The opening verses in the stanza helped us to understand the nature of that love as being much more than fond affirmation of the Scriptures or spiritual platitudes about God's Word. Instead, when we probed the text, we discovered that the sort of love expressed by the Psalmist involved a deep commitment to absorb the Word into his life so that his walk and his ways might be shaped by and conformed to all that God has said. This is what it means to love the Word of God!

Furthermore, we noted that the first evidence to substantiate a man's claim to this sort of love for God's Word had to do with whether or not that man biblically meditates on the Word he claims to love. Meditation as described in the Scripture is not a passive activity. Nor is it merely contemplating spiritual ideas on our own and then going in search of a text to justify them. Meditation is a spiritual discipline that seriously undertakes to know, understand, retain, and apply the precise statements God has made as they relate to specific circumstances and situations that arise in life. Furthermore, this is not a tedious burdensome practice but one in which he takes delight. Leupold made this observation when commenting on meditation in Psalm 1:2, "It is to him not a troublesome and unwelcome fetter; it is not a set of hard restraints. It is a joy for him to learn and to do the demands of the law."

This delightful occupation has a specific objective in view – the application of God's Word to life for the shaping of character and the determination of responses. In other words, meditation is a means to a goal and the goal is living a life that pleases God in every way by conforming to His Word. This is not meditation for meditation's sake! Rather, it is meditation for the purpose of life transformation. Leupold put it this way, "Obviously not an unwholesome absorption with the law is under consideration but a healthy interest in it and a knowledge of its real content, which continually influence and affect the man so devoted to this holy treasure."

So, loving God's Word is evidenced by a man's constant meditation upon its precepts in order that he might live his life guided by its instruction. However, such a life of meditation results in a wonderful benefit gained from God's Word – wisdom! When a man truly loves God's Word and as a

result spends time reading and understanding that Word, God Himself imparts wisdom from that Word to His servant. This wonderful benefit is the third aspect addressed in this stanza and the one to which we now direct our attention.

Note: In the previous edition we considered:

- I. *His Confident Confession (v. 97a)*
- II. *His Confirmatory Evidence (vv. 97b, 98b, 99b)*

III. His Consequential Benefit (vv. 98-100)

The Psalmist gives personal testimony to the benefit of cultivating a love for God's law that expresses itself in constant biblical meditation on what God has said in His Word. The supreme benefit of living this way is the obtaining of true biblical wisdom.

The nature of this wisdom

The wisdom described in this stanza is expressed in three terms designed to help us understand the full-orbed nature of what God has promised to give to those who meditate on His Words.

The first term is translated by the word "wisdom" in most translations. In verse 98 the verb form indicates that the psalmist has been made wise and what has made him wise are God's commandments. Wisdom in this sense has to do with skill or ability based on accurate and comprehensive knowledge one has learned to properly apply to life. Zemek described it this way, "It is the adaptation of what we know to what we have to do." So the first component of the full-orbed wisdom that comes to a man who meditates on God's Word is the skill and ability to take the knowledge he is gaining and adapt it properly to his life.

The second term used by the Psalmist is translated as "understanding" in verse 99. This term points to the component of insight that leads to prudence. It is more than just the ability to recall the information or reproduce the facts. It is the ability to penetrate into the true meaning of that information and to discern not just the meaning but the intent of the message. This is something that natural men do not possess innately (Psalm 14:2-3). Consequently men who fail to value God's Word properly soon depart from the proper path in life. Conversely, those who value God's Word and treasure it in their heart find themselves almost instinctively knowing what path is right before God. From this "understanding" gained from biblical meditation comes prudent conversation and conduct.

The final term used in this stanza to describe the wisdom that comes to those who meditate on God's Word is the term "discernment." It is translated as "understanding" in verse 100 but the Hebrew term is different than the one translated in verse 99, though our English translations have rendered them both "understanding." This third term speaks of the ability to discern rightly so as to make right choices and render appropriate decisions. When a man possesses wisdom, understanding, and discernment, he possesses a treasure of inestimable worth.

The value of this wisdom

The value of this wonderful wisdom gained from constant, careful meditation in God's Word is that it makes a man wiser than those who surround him and attempt to influence him in some way or another as he journeys on the pathway of the Word. In this case, the Psalmist points out that his love for God's Word and his meditation upon it has made him wiser than three classes of people commonly encountered by all of God's true pilgrims.

First, following God's commands has made him wiser than the craftiest of his enemies (v. 98). If his enemies are his own fellow Israelites, then they would have shared his knowledge of the commandments. They would have possessed the same information as the Psalmist. However, the

difference between our Pilgrim and his enemies is what he chose to do with the information he possessed. He obeyed God's commands while his enemies ignored them. Consequently, his obedience to divine expectation made him wiser than those enemies. However, if our Pilgrim was indeed Daniel (as we suggested earlier), then perhaps his enemies were not Israelites but rather pagan Chaldeans. In that case, how did he escape their crafty plots and snares set up to trap and destroy him? God's commandments were his safety. They made him wiser than his enemies and by obeying them, God preserved and elevated him above his fellows. A good case might be the crafty plot laid by the Chaldean magicians in an attempt to discredit Daniel's loyalty to the King and destroy his life from among them. However, as Daniel obeyed God's command to pray, God preserved him from the mouth of the lions. And, at the end of the story, it is Daniel's enemies who end up being destroyed in their own trap and eaten by the very lions they anticipated would eat Daniel.

Not only does this wisdom from God make a man wiser than his enemies, it makes him more insightful than his teachers (v. 99). Our Pilgrim speaks here of penetrating insight into the real nature of truth as he meditated on God's testimonies. Those set up among men as educators are presumed to have attained a certain amount of insight into how matters really are and not just how less-educated men perceive them to be. If our Psalmist is speaking of those in Israel who taught him, the implication again is that knowing about God's Word is not sufficient for gaining wisdom in and from God's Word. There were many "teachers" in Israel who knew God's Word. They could recite it in public worship. They fastidiously preserved it in written form. They even taught its precepts and demands to others. However, the Psalmist claims to have more insight than they. This is an astonishing claim. However, his claim to meditate on the testimony that God has given in His Word surely is the key. A man may know what God has said without truly believing it enough to conform his life to what God has testified. Such a man may know the Word, but his life proves he does not love it enough to live by its truth. Consequently, such a man will eventually suffer failure from lack of following truth even though he possesses the truth that would save him. Perhaps this is what the Psalmist had in mind as he contemplated the many false shepherds in Israel. However, if Daniel wrote this, then perhaps his teachers were those who taught him the tongue and the learning of the Chaldeans (Daniel 1:4). These men were the learned men of the day and their fame extended throughout the world. In fact, tradition has it that the Magi who came and visited the Lord after His birth were descendants of the Chaldeans mentioned in the book of Daniel. Daniel, their student, possessed greater insight than any of those who taught him. In fact, his insight was so legendary that it elevated him to the highest position under Darius in the kingdom (Daniel 6:1-3). Earlier, Belshazzar praised Daniel as a man of light and understanding and excellent wisdom (Daniel 5:15-16). Daniel was able to solve enigmas that eluded the wisest of the wise men in the kingdom and he did so under three different monarchs – Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:1-45), Belshazzar (Daniel 5:13-29), and Darius (Daniel 6:1-3). What was it that gave Daniel such penetrating insight? God did. God's testimonies about life and truth guided Daniel to seek God's revelation and to speak it accurately where others were clueless.

Finally, God's wisdom makes a man more discerning than any of his elders (v. 100). The elders in a community are its most senior members. They are the ones to whom the community entrusts leadership and to whom they look for wisdom and direction and from whom they seek wise and just decision. Elders usually get this trust because, well, they are old and have lived long and seen much. The aged in a community like Israel were considered wise and in a community where wisdom was valued, the aged were often the ones who directed the outcome of events and secured the future of the community. Our Pilgrim claims to have more insight and discernment than any of the elders before him. However, he can make this claim not on the strength of his age, but rather on the basis of the source of his wisdom.

The source of this wisdom

God Himself has taught the Psalmist. When one is taught personally by the Ancient of Days, then such wisdom does indeed prove wiser than that of the ancients, for no one is more ancient than the One who is more ancient than days! The Psalmist gives testimony to the fact that God has indeed

taught him this wisdom personally (v. 102). Furthermore, God is willing to teach all who are willing to meet the requirement the Psalmist met in his day.

The requirement of this wisdom

George Zemek observed, “True wisdom does not depend on a life-long experience but rather on obedience to God’s precepts.” As we have noted earlier in our study of this Psalm, the term “precepts” reminds us that God’s Word is not merely His suggestion as to how man might best live a fulfilling life. The term itself speaks of God’s words as divinely fixed and inherently authoritative. They are His declarations of what He has appointed and fixed and therefore requires of those who call upon His name. A man who desires the sort of wisdom articulated here by the Psalmist must be willing to meditate deeply on God’s Word and to give whole-hearted obedience to both the spirit and the letter of God’s orders for life. It is true that information is a necessary component to achieve wisdom; however, information by itself is insufficient to produce the kind of wisdom that is in focus here in this stanza. That sort of wisdom comes only to those who have been personally instructed by God Himself. And to be a student in God’s classroom requires heart-felt obedience on the part of the student to apply what God has taught him to all of life. One commentator put it this way: “You must convert knowledge to wisdom and that requires personal, committed obedience.”

IV. His Consistent Application (vv. 101-102)

Proof that the Psalmist indeed possessed the sort of wisdom described in this stanza comes in the form of consistent application of that wisdom to life’s choices and direction. The application of wisdom to his life kept him from every evil way and bound him tightly to God’s righteous judgments.

The Psalmist has described his life as a pilgrimage on a particular path – the path set forth in the first Psalm as the one whose end brings success and spiritual life to all who choose to walk therein. However, there are other paths available to him. Frequently as he journeys along the right path he is faced with temptations and opportunities to depart from this path for another that appears more appealing or perhaps is more traveled by others. However, he possesses a wisdom that causes him to restrain his feet from paths that many others around him are choosing.

Interestingly, he reminds his readers that these other paths are not just wrong paths, they are evil paths. A wrong turn on a journey is not necessarily a morally-evil turn. If I were traveling from one city to another and took a wrong turn, I am not on a morally-evil road. I am simply on a road that leads me away from my stated destination. Many Christians view life in this way. There are many paths to choose and the vast majority of them are not evil. They may not lead to my stated destination, but they are fine paths nonetheless. However, as you encounter those pilgrims later in the journey their garments have become stained with moral and spiritual defilement that they encountered on the path. The Psalmist makes clear that all other paths but this are not just wrong options, they are evil ones that should be strenuously avoided by God’s people. Walking an evil path and walking in wisdom are mutually incompatible. As Zemek observes, “One cannot be lax about evil and expect to profit in the use of the Word!”

Not only did the Psalmist restrain his feet from the wrong path, he did so with an express purpose in view – that he might better obey God’s Word. There are certain paths that make obedience to God extremely difficult if not impossible and only foolish and careless pilgrims tread thereon. The Psalmist allowed God to choose His path and he followed that particular path in order to obey God’s precepts. Obedience is never easy. However, God has marked out a path for our feet and if we follow that path, He will grant our heart’s desire and enable us to obey His Word. Unfortunately, often our desire influences what path we choose to walk. If we desire to live a lax spiritual life, we will choose the path of least resistance. If, however, we desire to live obediently before our God, then the path laid out in His Word will be our choice as it was for the Psalmist.

The Psalmist restrained his feet from evil paths and he also refused to depart from faithful adherence to God’s judgments or decisions about life. He remained spiritually steadfast in the

journey. God Himself “torahed” this pilgrim and therefore, he remained faithful to God’s declarations. When we sit at God’s feet and allow Him to be our teacher, He has a way of insuring we master His material. Unfortunately, many modern pilgrims fail to trust God and instead lean to their own wisdom and understanding and chose paths whose beginnings seem right and good but whose bitter end is death.

V. His Constant Spiritual Responses (vv. 103-104)

The wisdom described in this stanza is evidenced by constant biblical meditation on its source, the Word of God. This wisdom makes a man wiser than his enemies, his educators, and his elders. The application of it restrains God’s servant from evil paths and binds him closely to God’s judgments, but it has an additional benefit. Wisdom gained from a life of biblical meditation properly shapes a man’s internal responses so that he delights in right things and abhors wrong things.

The Psalmist gives testimony that God’s words are smooth to his mouth and sweet like honey. The term “sweet” in the first part of the verse is an unusual term that is best rendered “smooth.” It speaks to how easily something enters the mouth and goes down one’s throat. The best comparison the Psalmist could come up with was honey. In our day, sweet things are readily available. There are hundreds of substances made from sugar and there are scores of artificial sweeteners readily available. To us, unless honey comes in a package at the grocery store, it is not worth the trouble to obtain. However, this was not the case in the ancient world. Honey was one of the sweetest substances available to man. It was greatly valued and men would gladly endure the sting of the bees in order to procure this sweet and refreshing treat. This sweet substance was smooth and soothing as it entered into one’s mouth and went down the throat. The eater not only enjoyed a wonderful and tasteful treat, he soon found himself refreshed and revived. This is the effect the Psalmist ascribes to God’s Word. It is sweet, smooth, and spiritually refreshing.

Not only did meditation on God’s Word properly shape his spiritual tastes, it properly set his emotions. He gave testimony to hating every false way (v. 104). A man whose inner responses have been properly set by God’s Word learns to passionately hate certain things. We are not emotionally balanced if all we experience in our life is love for God and for good spiritual things in life. We must also passionately hate the things that oppose God and are contrary to His will.

In the same way that the psalmist’s tastes were reshaped so that what is abhorrent to natural men was sweet to him, so what was sweet to the pagan heart became abhorrent to him. His dislike of false ways marked him as one of God’s true children and gave weight and credence to his initial claim to love God’s laws.

No one who truly loves God’s laws can at the same time love the false ways prohibited by those laws. And what changed the natural desires of our Pilgrim into the ones described here was the wisdom gained from God’s Word. These are not tastes naturally acquired by fallen men. They are only acquired by sitting at God’s table and eating the spiritual bread prepared by Him. Such a life is obtained by faithfully meditating on God’s Word and following God’s orders!

Conclusion

What does a balanced mature life look like? It looks like a heart with healthy desires. Loving God means hating false ways. False people love false paths. God’s servants love God’s orders and by them are kept from false paths. The Word of God is sweet to them and in it they find security in life. They learn in advance the folly of the evil way. They choose to be taught by God rather than to be taught by the bitter consequences of wrong choices intentionally made. They learn at the feet of God what chastened pilgrims give grievous testimony to regarding the evil path. As Bridges stated years ago in his commentary on this stanza, “Inquire of those , whose past wanderings justly give weight and authority to their verdict –

‘What is your retrospective view of these ways?’ Unprofitableness. ‘What is your present view of them?’ Shame. ‘What prospect for eternity would the continuance in them assure to you?’ Death.”

We can end on no better note than the exhortation Bridges had for his readers: “But let me ask myself, have I detected the false ways of my own heart? Little is done in spiritual religion, until my besetting sins are searched out. And let me not be satisfied with forbearance from the outward act. Sin may be restrained, yet not mortified; nor is it enough that I leave it for the present, but I must renounce it forever. Let me not part with it as with a beloved friend, with the hope and purpose of renewing my familiarity with it at a ‘more convenient season’ but let me shake it from me, as Paul shook off the viper into the fire, with determination and abhorrence.”

As observed already, “One cannot be lax about evil and expect to profit in the use of the Word.” It is precisely by the use of the Word that we learn to abhor evil! It is through constant meditation upon it that God’s laws, precepts, statutes, judgments, and testimonies become sweet to us like honey. So, let us join the Psalmist in his declaration – “Oh how I love Your law! It is my meditation continually.”