

Truth Talk Truth Talk

Psalm 119 – The Word for Life!

The Secret to An Enlarged Heart for God Stanza 5 – Verses 33-40

Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, And I shall keep it to the end. ³⁴ *Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; Indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart.* ³⁵ *Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it.* ³⁶ *Incline my heart to Your testimonies, And not to covetousness.* ³⁷ *Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things, And revive me in Your way.* ³⁸ *Establish Your word to Your servant, Who is devoted to fearing You.* ³⁹ *Turn away my reproach which I dread, For Your judgments are good.* ⁴⁰ *Behold, I long for Your precepts; Revive me in Your righteousness.*

A helpful way to understand the message of this psalm is to see it as the psalmist's personal testimony of what he encountered in his attempt to walk in the path of God's righteous way. We have already noted that the central theme of Psalm 119 is the Word of God. In fact, God's Word is described by eight different words occurring throughout the psalm, each of which directs attention to an important aspect, quality, or function the Bible has for the life and walk of an obedient believer.

However, a second important consideration to which the psalmist calls attention is the "way" or "path" prescribed by God for those who love Him. The Psalter opens with a psalm identifying the two specific "paths" set before every man. The choice a man makes regarding which path he will walk throughout his life will determine his direction in this life and his destiny in the next. This psalm (119) records the testimony of a man who has chosen the "way" or path that God said would lead to prosperity and eternal life. In other words, Psalm 119 is the personal record of a man who has chosen not to walk in the counsel of the ungodly, not to stand in the way of sinners, and not to sit in the seat of the scornful (Psalm 1:1). Instead, he has determined to delight in the Law of the Lord (Torah) and to mediate therein throughout his entire life (Psalm 1:2). Consequently, he anticipates being successful and fruitful in his life before God (Psalm 1:3).

The first two stanzas of Psalm 119 record his observation that others who have walked in this way have been blessed for doing so (119:1-4). He has determined to join them on this path and has expressed this in a heartfelt cry in which he promises to praise Him out of a right heart (119:7) and to obey him out of an informed heart (119:7b-8). What will inform and instruct his heart in the "way" he has chosen is none other than the Word of God (119:9-16) which is his delight and whose words he intends to learn, memorize, and mediate on in order that he might keep them with all of his heart, in all of his ways, for all of his days.

However, as he embarks on the path with a heart strengthened by good intention, he quickly encounters strong derision and opposition from those who have chosen to walk the other "path" (119:17-24). In this third stanza he responds to oppression by adopting God's testimonies as his counselors to guide him in the way he should go.

The fourth stanza (119:25-32) reveals yet another obstacle standing in the way of his commitment to walk in God's way – his own sinful inclination. His soul is literally crushed within him and brought low (119:25) when he measures his actual performance against the desires he has so courageously stated in the first two stanzas. But, as downcast as his soul might be, he refuses to

remain “in the dust.” Nor does he attempt to stand in his own strength. Rather, he asks God to enlarge his heart in order that he might “run” in the path of God’s commandments (119:32).

His desire for God to enlarge his heart so he can walk obediently is directly dependent on his ability to understand God’s word. He can’t obey what he doesn’t know or understand so the fifth stanza (119:33-40) contains a series of specific petitions for enlightenment and empowerment to know and obey God’s Word.

The Nature of the Petitions

This stanza in the Psalmist’s acrostic is arranged under the letter “he.” In the Hebrew alphabet this letter is often used to alert the reader to verbs that are causative in nature. A causative verb is one in which something or someone is caused to do an action. One of the easiest ways to understand this concept is to observe the language the psalmist uses in this stanza where he asks God to cause him to do or experience something. Each of his petitions can be expressed and introduced with this formula: “Make me to . . .” Make me to learn the way of your statutes (32). Make me to understand (34). Make me to march in the path of your commandments (35). Make my heart desire your testimonies (36). Make my eyes turn away from looking at vanity (37). Make good your promises to me (38). Make my reproach depart from me (39).

Clearly, the psalmist recognizes his need for the things he is asking God to give him. But in asking for them in this way, he is stressing his inability to gain any of these necessary things in his own strength. In other words, it is not merely reading the Bible more that will give him what he lacks. Nothing short of God teaching and causing him to understand will allow him to stay on the right path to the end.

When we pray these petitions for ourselves, we must also come to this same conclusion. These kinds of prayers are prayed by people who have come to the end of themselves. Those who have found themselves “in the dust” in spite of their best efforts and their determination to “live for God” are in the perfect position to look up to God and pray these same requests that God would do for them what they can’t do on their own.

The Goal of the Petitions

The first two verses of this stanza reveal the psalmist’s goal or desire in praying for God to enlighten him. He wants this understanding in order that he might walk in the path to the end (119:33). His reason for asking is wrapped up in his desire for a renewed commitment to walking in the way of God’s righteous statutes. And, he wants to walk in this way to the very end of his life.

He also desires enlightenment in the righteous law of God, the Torah, so that his obedience will come out of a right heart attitude (119:34) and that it not be merely external obedience forced from a heart internally directed to the other path. He wants to obey God with all of his heart, in all of his ways, and for all of his days. However, in order for this to truly happen in him, God is going to have to cause it to come about. And with this in mind, he sets out to beseech God for specific things that are necessary for life-long, wholehearted obedience.

The Content of the Petitions

The verses that make up this stanza contain seven specific requests that can be summed up in the concept of enablement. He has articulated his desire to walk in this way earlier in the psalm. He has also encountered difficulty and even failure in spite of his best and most determined intentions to walk blamelessly in this way. In “the dust” of personal failure, his need for divine enablement has become painfully clear. But what is it that will actually enable him to walk the path successfully? What exactly does he need God to enable him to do? This enablement comes in the form of seven distinct things the psalmist asks God to do for him.

First, he needs God's instruction (119:33). He needs God to make him learn the way of His statutes – His permanent and abiding spiritual laws. The term “teach” is the word from which the term “torah” is derived. It depicts God's Word as divine instruction and the psalmist is recognizing it as such. He is also acknowledging that he needs more than mental or cognitive understanding of the terms and concepts contained therein. He needs something that only God can give – he needs Divine instruction so that he is made to understand the direction God wants his life to take. And his stated goal in wanting this instruction is that he might observe or live out his life accordingly.

Not only does he need Divine instruction, he needs illumination (119:34). The term “understanding” points to the idea of discernment or perception. He has no hope of obeying instruction apart from illumination or discernment about that instruction. This request reveals an important point in walking consistently in the path. It is not enough to give rote or wooden obedience to the statements of Scripture. Such obedience will never suffice to live obediently under all the diverse circumstances that arise in life. Rather, one must know the purpose, intent, and direction of the statements in Scripture in order to keep the spirit of the law as well as the letter. And, in order to be able to discern how to live biblically in situations not specifically addressed in Scripture, one needs understanding or illumination from God. Interestingly, the reason for this request is precisely that he might give careful attention and wholehearted obedience to God's divine instruction. He is not at all content to just know enough to obey in order to be able to say he obeyed. He is not wanting to get away with something simply because God has not specifically prohibited or mandated it. Rather, he is asking God to cause him to understand His instruction so that he will know how to obey in every circumstance he encounters on the path of righteousness.

His third petition is for Divine motivation (35). He has chosen to make God's law his delight (Psalm 1:2) and now he is asking God to cause him to march in accordance and obedience to the specific commandments in that Law. He is asking God to cause him to obey His divine will as it has been revealed in His divine commandments. And, the reason he wants God to make him walk in this way is his love for the way of righteousness. The thing he delights in is more than mere “law-keeping.” It is the pathway itself that occupies his favor. He has observed that those who walk in this path have been blessed and so he is favorably inclined to this way of life. His favorable inclination stands behind his petition for God to make him walk in accordance with His commandments.

Fourth, the psalmist pleads for right heart inclination (36). He knows only too well the nature and bent of his heart toward foolish and worthless things. God must actively turn or bend his heart in a new direction. God must turn his heart away from worthlessness and to that which has eternal worth – His testimonies!

Since a man's heart is affected by what his eyes behold (Job 31:7; Proverbs 15:30), the psalmist's fifth petition is for divine redirection of his vision (119:37). He asks God to direct his eyes away from vanity and worthlessness. It is quite possible that the reason he finds himself off the path he has chosen and in the dust of failure is precisely because his eyes were diverted by the glitter of some worthless pleasure or temptation. As he reflects on how he arrived at his painful condition, he asks God to redirect his vision to things that are weighty and worthwhile; namely, God's path. And, he asks God to quicken him and to cause him to “live” in His way.

Because he is going against the strong inclination produced by what his eyes see on every hand, the psalmist next asks God for confirmation of all that He has promised in His Word (119:38). The term “establish” means in this context to confirm something that God has said or promised. To paraphrase the psalmist, “When my eyes consider something that seems to contradict something You have said, Lord confirm that what you have said or promised is indeed so.” The psalmist asks for this confirmation because he understands the importance of relying confidently in God's statements because they are the source of the fear of God which is the beginning of wisdom. This fear is essential in the believer's sanctification. Contemporary Christendom has downplayed the importance of a biblical fear of the Lord and replaced it with an overly casual approach to God. However, not

only is the fear of the Lord the beginning of true wisdom, it is the source of spiritual health and growth (Acts 9:31; Romans 11:20-21; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Philippians 2:12; 1 Peter 1:17).

The final petition is one for vindication (119:39). He asks God to remove or avert the reproach that has come upon him. This reproach is either the scorn heaped upon him by those on the other path who oppose him or it is the reproach of his failure to live up to his decision to walk the path of righteousness successfully. In either case, he realizes that such reproach will not go away merely through new declarations about his future intentions or even by his diligent efforts to get back on the path. God Himself must vindicate him and this will come only when God removes the reproach that is upon him. It is quite possible that the reproach he speaks of is somehow associated to his obedience rather than his failure simply because he hastens to avow the goodness of God's rules or judgments. If he is speaking of this reproach as the divine consequences he has experienced for disobedience, then he is asking God to remove them after God has answered his prayer for enlightenment and empowerment. If, on the other hand, he is speaking of the reproach he has experienced for choosing to walk the path of righteousness, then he is asking God to remove vindicate him and he is acknowledging that he is being reproached for a good or righteous thing – God's judgments.

The Ground of the Petitions

The final verse in this stanza does not begin with a strong causative petition but rather with a loud affirmation. The psalmist calls God's attention to something which is in fact the ground for all of his previous petitions – "Behold, I long for your precepts!" (119:40). The reason he wants God to enlighten (by means of instruction and understanding) and empower him to keep God's statutes and Law is that he longs after God's precepts just as a loyal subordinate longs to obey the instructions and commandments of a beloved superior. He is pointing to his loyal love for God and he is expressing that loyal love as a longing to obey God's instruction and to meet God's expectations.

However, even in this praiseworthy longing, the psalmist recognizes his total inability to fulfill his heart's desire. He acknowledges that he is at best an unprofitable servant. However, he can be profitable; he can be obedient; he can meet God's righteous expectations if God will give him strength and life to do so. Hence, he ends this stanza with one final plea – "Revive me by your righteousness!"

As it was for the psalmist, so it is for every true believer who desires to live a life that consistently pleases God and conforms to His Word. We can't do so in our own righteousness. Our only hope is that He would give us strength and life and that comes from His limitless and boundless righteousness which He has freely given to us in Christ without measure. Therefore, there is no reason to remain in the dust of our failure. Rather, let us call out with the psalmist for God to revive us and when He has done so, let us dust off our failure and set out on the path afresh, strengthened with a strength that is not our own!