

TruthTalk with Sam Horn

Introduction to Psalm 119

In this initial installment, I want to introduce you to the psalm itself. Psalm 119 consists of 176 verses arranged in 22 stanzas. Each stanza contains eight verses. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and the author has carefully composed the psalm as a specialized acrostic where each stanza corresponds to a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Additionally, the first word of each verse in each of the stanzas begins with the Hebrew letter assigned to that stanza. For example, all the verses in the first stanza (verses 1-8) begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph. The only other example in the Bible of an extended portion of Scripture designed this way is the book of Lamentations. One of the reasons the Psalmist may have done this was to make it easier to memorize this psalm. Another important reason may have been his desire to communicate the completeness of what he had to say about his theme. In other words, Psalm 119 was designed to communicate from “A to Z” on the topic of God’s Word.

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Without question, this kind of careful and deliberate thought alerts the reader to the importance and significance of the message contained in the psalm. This message is revealed by the structure of the psalm itself as the importance of God’s Word for life and godliness. There are eight different words referring to God’s Word that occur throughout the psalm. In most cases, most of the eight words occur at least once in each of the 22 stanza. The first word, *law*, is the primary word used in this psalm to refer to God’s Word. In its broadest sense, “law” refers to any instruction revealed by God as the basis for life and action. In its more narrow sense “law” can refer to the Mosaic Law, the Pentateuch, or the Deuteronomic Law. Psalm 119 presents the Law of God as His overall instruction and direction whereby His people may find life, blessing, and success. The second term, *testimonies*, has the idea of “witness.” One commentator observed that the “Law of God is His testimony because it is His own witness to His nature, attributes, actions, and consequent demands. . . . This term emphasizes both the authority of their source in the LORD, and the accountability of their reception by men.” God’s Word holds men accountable to the God of the Word and witnesses against them when they fail to meet the standards contained therein (Deut. 31:26). The third word used by the psalmist for God’s Word is *precepts*. This term comes from the image of an officer or overseer giving specific instructions to be carried out by others. God’s Word articulates the specific instructions and expectations He has for His people, and for which they will be accountable. The next term, *statutes*, speaks to the permanence and the binding nature of God’s Word. God’s statutes have been written down and preserved because God’s desires His people to obey them always and without exception. God’s words are always valid. To be sure, God’s people must give careful attention to how certain parts of God’s Word are to be applied in their cultural context but at the end of the day, God has spoken once and we must give glad and consistent obedience to what God has said. The term *commandments* is related in thought to the statutes of the Lord. However, this term focuses attention on the lawful authority behind the words. God’s statutes are binding because they are His commandments and as such, are backed by His authority as the supreme, sovereign, and moral Law-giver. Yet another term used by the psalmist to describe God’s Word is *ordinances*. An ordinance refers to a decision or legal judgment handed down by a judge in a court of law or by a ruler settling a dispute among his subjects. The psalmist uses this term to describe the judgments and decisions from God about matters related to the affairs of His people. In general terms an ordinance refers to God’s revealed will or decision about a matter related to common human situations. In particular, God’s ordinances in the Old Testament were His commands that formed the basis of Israel’s legal system. The final two terms are *word* and *promises*. The former is the most general term for God’s Word and encompasses the sum total of God’s truth in any form whether stated, promised,

or commanded. The latter word can have this broader meaning but more often it refers to a specific statement made by God which He intends to fulfill.

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But, the psalmist acknowledges that apart from God's enablement, he is powerless to understand or obey what God has said. And so, as one commentator observed, "This man of God never besought God merely to teach him His Word but to form within him the way of that Word." Whoever the psalmist was, he understood the ultimate end of God's Word was to shape his life and that the means for doing so was obeying what God had revealed with a full hearted obedience rising from proper attitudes and motives toward God and His Word. And, this obedience was to manifest itself in all of life's ways and for all of the psalmist's days.

It is evident from the internal evidence of this psalm that its writer was acquainted with the struggle of living for God in a world that had abandoned Him. One writer observed, "The psalmist knows firsthand the oppression of evil. He has been surrounded by wickedness, pursued by the arrogant and proud, humbled by sorrow and disgrace; yet his refuge is in God. He constantly cries out to God, retreats into His shadow, and finds solace in His strength. This is a psalm not only of law, but of love, not only of statute, but of spiritual strength, not only of devotion to precept, but of loyalty to the way of the Lord!"

So, who was this man? What were the circumstances that produced such powerful and wondrous words from the Lord? Some have argued that these were David's words penned toward the end of his life as a testimony both to the value of God's Word for guiding one's life and to the power of God's Word for cleansing one's life from sin and error. Others believe this psalm came from the pen of Ezra, the ready Scribe in the Law of Moses. My own opinion is that this Psalm was written during the time of Israel's long exile in Babylon and that its author was most likely the prophet Daniel. One commentator defending Daniel's authorship makes this case:

He, above all men whose lives are in the Old Testament recorded to us, had in his youth cleansed his way by guarding it according to God's word (cf. v. 9). Cast as a stranger and a pilgrim in a foreign land (vv.19, 54), yet still assured that God's mercies would be vouchsafed to his servants wheresoever in the wide earth they might dwell (v. 64), he had found God's testimonies far dearer to him than all manner of worldly wealth (vv. 14, 36, 37, 72, 127). Reproached (vv. 22, 23), derided (v. 51), slandered (v. 69), and plotted against (vv. 78, 85, 86, 95, 110, 161) by the proud princes whom he had never wronged . . . he had yet spoken of God's testimonies even before kings, and had not been ashamed (v. 46). . . . The whole psalm bespeaks the character of one who, like Daniel, lived in close and habitual communion with God; one habitually trained from his youth upwards in secret self-discipline, the peaceful flow of his whole saintly career was not marked by the ruggedness which would generally flow, as in the case of St. Paul, from sudden conversion, or by the fitfulness attaching to lives that, like David's, have been once disordered by acts of heinous transgression; one indeed who was not without spot, who confessed his sin, who relied only on God's grace to reclaim him from the many strayings of which he was conscious (v. 176); but yet "a man greatly beloved," one of the pure in heart who might see God, and whom therefore God numbered, along with the patriarch Joseph

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and the evangelist St. John, among the special few to whom he partially unlocked the secrets of the times and seasons of the future.

However, God has chosen in His providence to withhold the identity of the author that we, the readers, might focus on the applicability of the psalm to the circumstances of life that are common to all of God's people. Psalm 119 is an expanded commentary on what it means to be a "blessed man . . . whose delight is in the Law of the Lord" (Psalm 1:1-2).

How are we to benefit from this psalm? How are we to use it for life and Godliness?

Read it regularly. In order for the Word to impact our hearts, it must be ingested by means of regular reading. One way in which this might be done with this psalm is to take each section and read it daily during the course of one week. By repeated reading in this way, it is possible to become thoroughly acquainted with the content of the psalm during the course of a normal school year. Both the brevity and the content of each section make this an ideal psalm to use either in personal or family devotions.

Meditate on it carefully. One commentator entitled his work on this psalm, "The Word of God in the Child of God." One must go beyond mere familiarity in order for this psalm to have its intended effect on daily living. For this to happen, meditation on the truths contained in each section is essential. Perhaps the best and most profitable way for this to happen is to select a good commentary on this psalm and read it along with the section in focus for that week. One of the best works on this psalm from a devotional standpoint is the three volume set on *Psalms* by James Montgomery Boice. Spurgeon's *Treasury of David* also contains many wonderful devotional thoughts drawn from these verses. Those desiring to go a bit deeper will find a great deal of help in an older commentary written in 1827 by Charles Bridges entitled *Psalm 119*. For the truly committed, Thomas Manton's three volume work on *Psalm 119* will prove to be a treasury of truth. My personal favorite is a work by a former professor of mine, George Zemek, entitled *The Word of God in the Child of God*. I have found it helpful to read the section of the psalm and then work my way slowly through that section in the commentary. I keep a highlighter handy and will make note ideas or information that impacts me in the margins of my Bible next to the verse itself.

Apply it personally. Obviously the goal of this repeated reading and careful study is genuine life change. The means by which the change will come about is whole hearted obedience based on belief in what God has said through the psalmist. As we read and believe we must come to depend on God to conform our life accordingly. It would be most to spend a year reading and meditating on this portion of God's Word and come away unchanged. One of the ways to facilitate this process is to personally pray for the things the psalmist requests God in this psalm. For example, the "HE" stanza (verses 33 – 40) contains nine specific requests the psalmist makes of God. You can take each of these requests and ask God in prayer to grant them to personally.

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Memorize it diligently. The idea of memorizing a portion of Scripture of this length is daunting to most of us. However, many of God's children have successfully memorized this psalm and have found the exercise to be of great spiritual benefit. For example, John Ruskin was a layman who lived over 100 years ago. His mother taught him to memorize Scripture as a boy and one of the portions she helped him memorize was Psalm 119. He spoke of this years later and said, "It is strange that of all the pieces of the Bible which my mother taught me, that which cost me most to learn, and which was to my childish mind, chiefly repulsive—the 119th Psalm—has now become of all the most precious to me in its overflowing and glorious passion of love for the Law of God." William Wilberforce, the

famous British politician who almost single-handedly brought down the practice of slavery in England spoke of the comfort he gained on occasions when he would quote the 119th psalm. The famous missionary to India, Henry Martyn, memorized this psalm as did David Livingstone, missionary to Africa. Perhaps the most unusual story of the benefit to memorizing this psalm is the story of George Wishart, Bishop of Edinburgh in the 18th century. It seems that he found himself in a difficult spot after being condemned to death. He was confident of a pardon that had not yet arrived even at the moment he stood on the scaffold to meet his fate. Taking advantage of the time honored tradition of allowing the condemned man to pray a psalm, Wishart chose to recite in prayer the text of the 119th psalm. Before he was finished praying the delayed pardon arrived and his life was spared. One can only imagine his ill fortune had he not memorized this psalm.

In the weeks ahead we will explore the structure of the psalm itself as well as the content and truth for life found in each stanza. It is my prayer for all of us, that as we study this psalm, we will find all that we need for life and godliness. May the Lord help us to love, learn, and live out this psalm in our daily walk with God.