



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION
WASHINGTON, DC

WORDS OF SPIRIT AND LIFE

Psalm 119 (Ezekiel 36:24-28, John 6:63-69)

Dan Claire

The Feast of Pentecost, May 20, 2018

This is a message about Psalm 119. There isn't time to go through its entire 176 verses in detail, but that's okay, because Ps 119 wasn't intended for exposition in a sermon. It was made, rather, for singing and for prayer, though we often skip past it because of its length. What I hope to do in this message is to try to help us make friends with this psalm and to say a few words regarding its significance at Pentecost.

DO YOU LOVE GOD'S WORD?

How do you feel about the Bible? When the Museum of the Bible opened in late 2017, journalists asked Washingtonians to share their thoughts about the museum in particular and the Bible in general. One thing was clear: passions run high when it comes to the Bible. "The Bible is the enemy of science." "No, the Bible is compatible with science." "The Bible is the root of all evils in America." "No, the Bible is America's last and only hope." From billboards and bumper stickers to academic papers and arguments before the Supreme Court, the Bible is as controversial as ever.

Setting aside the highly-charged atmosphere of the public square, how do *you* feel about the Bible? Does it energize you? Does it make you feel guilty? Is it a gift? A burden? A blessing? A curse? Again, even personally, passions run high.

I spend a lot of my time with the Bible, reading it & thinking about how to teach it. I enjoy it. Truth be told, however, I don't hop out of bed in the morning saying, "I love it!"

Many Christians feel the same way. Every September the members of our church reaffirm the beliefs and practices we have in common by renewing a membership covenant. Regarding the Bible, our membership covenant says: "I believe that the Bible is God's Word written and, as such, is the supreme authority in the life of this church." That means that we agree to the *trustworthiness* and *authority* of the Bible. But what if our membership covenant simply read, "I *delight* in God's word"? How many of us, in good conscience, could make such an affirmation?

THE THEME OF THE PSALMS: DELIGHTING IN GOD'S WORD¹

The Book of Psalms begins with an introduction—an orientation to the entire book. Psalm 1 introduces the big idea of “the blessed life” that recurs throughout the Book of Psalms. Psalm 1 presents two ways to live, one that leads to *misery*, and the other that leads to *blessing*. Both ways are defined by communication within community. One way begins (Ps 1:1) with walking in wicked counsel, then standing along the sinners’ way, then sitting in the scoffer’s seat, and eventually withering into chaff scattered by the wind. The blessed person, however, is the one who (Ps 1:2) *delights* in God’s word, and who meditates on it day and night.² That person becomes like a mighty tree (Ps 1:3) whose strength is below ground, in roots that drink continually from the living water of God’s word. The blessed person believes that communion with God through his Word is the primary source for life. Yes, there are a lot of ways to improve your health, by going to the dentist, getting enough sleep, exercising, and so on. However, nothing will have as great an impact on your total well being as *delighting* in and meditating on God’s Word.

In Ps 1:2, the Hebrew verb translated “meditate” describes the engine idle of creatures and things, whether the drone of an instrument like a lute, or the cooing of pigeons, or the roaring of lions, or the murmuring of humans. We all engage in self-talk, all the time, sometimes aloud, but more often silently in our hearts. The question isn’t whether we’re meditating, since we do it all the time. Rather, the question is what we’re meditating on, for our hearts are always murmuring something. Are we echoing and amplifying the counsel of the wicked? Or are we repeating the Word of the Lord? The blessed person in the psalms is the one who *delights* in God’s word, whose heart is murmuring God’s Word all the time.

Delight in God’s word, meditate on it day and night, and you will have a blessed life. That’s the thesis statement at the beginning of the psalms, and through the rest of the Psalms the idea recurs again and again. E.g. “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (Psalm 19:14).

In Psalm 119, the longest chapter of the Bible, and the longest of all the psalms, this idea of meditating on God’s Word comes to full fruition.

ORIENTATION TO PSALM 119

From an artistic vantage point, Psalm 119 is one of the literary wonders of the world. It was composed in Hebrew as an alphabetic acrostic, with every line of each eight-verse section beginning with successive letters in Hebrew. Thus, the first eight verses begin with א (Aleph), and the next eight verses begin with ב (Beth), and so on, all the way to the last eight verses

¹ For more on this topic, see the lessons from Resurrection’s 2018 Annual Parish Retreat, “The Blessed Life” and “Blessed Speech,” at RezChurch.org.

² “Day and night” is a hendiadys meaning “all the time.”

beginning with ם (Tav), the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. That's 8 verses per letter, with 22 letters = 176 lines of poetry.

From the beginning, Ps 119 resumes the theme of delighting in God's word:

- [1] *Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord!*
[2] *Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their whole heart,
[3] who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways! (Psalm 119:1-3)*

These first three verses sound like a reprise of Psalm 1. Once again, here's the theme of blessing, and the idea that there are two ways to walk, with the way that leads to the blessed life being one of communion with God. The blessed life comes to those who seek the Lord with their whole hearts. And how does one do that? By walking, or living, according to the word of the Lord.

God's word is overwhelmingly in focus in Psalm 119. There are two "word" words used in vv 1-2.

- In v 1, the "law" of the Lord (Perhaps better translated "instruction.")
- In v 2, God's "testimonies"

In addition to those two, there are six other "word" words used somewhat interchangeably throughout the psalm:

- "precepts" in v 4
- "statutes" in v 5
- "commandments" in v 6
- "rules" in v 7 (Perhaps better translated "judgments")
- "word" in v 9
- "promise" in v 11

Psalm 119 regularly uses these eight Hebrew "word" words as synonyms for God's word. There are lots of variations throughout the 176 lines, but roughly speaking each line uses one of these eight "word" words, and each eight-verse section associated with a particular Hebrew letter uses each of these "word" words once.³ Only four lines in the entire psalm don't have one of the eight "word" words, but each of those lines seems to have an alternative synonym. E.g. in v 3, "God's ways" seems to be equivalent to his Word.

³ Christopher Ash, *Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God: Psalm 119 for the Bible Teacher and Hearer* (Proclamation Trust), Christian Focus, 2011, p. 34. This is a great resource for making sense of Psalm 119.

All this to say that each of the 176 lines of this Psalm delighting in God's word. But importantly, none of those "word" words ever point to a particular book or chapter or verse. Not one of them says, e.g. I delight in "the statutes delivered to Moses on stone tablets," or I delight in "the promises as recorded by Samuel during the reign of King David." They're all unspecific, speaking broadly of God's word in general. This is significant, because it means that the central focus of Psalm 119 remains the *person* behind the eight "word" words. *God is the one who teaches, rules, commands, promises, etc.* Therefore, it's God himself who guides us in the blessed way.⁴ And how does he guide us? By his word. We ought to delight in his word, because we delight in him.

There's an important transition in v 4 that emphasizes the God-centeredness of Psalm 119. We have already observed that vv 1-3 reprise Psalm 1. These introductory verses are written in the 3rd person: "Blessed are those whose way is blameless..." etc. But note the transition beginning in v 4:

[4] *You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.*

[5] *Oh that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes! (Psalm 119:4-5)*

Starting in v 4, the psalm becomes a personal prayer to God. From this point forward, the lines are sung to him in the second person singular: "You have commanded..." It continues in this fashion all the way to the concluding verse, which says, "Seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments." Except for the opening three lines, the entire body of Ps 119 is sung to God, who is the source of the blessed life!

MAKING USE OF PSALM 119

Nevertheless, it can be challenging to know how to use of Psalm 119. For one thing, it's a very long psalm, and that's a challenge because we're an impatient lot. Instead of praying through it, people often try to make use of it by way of what Christopher Ash calls the "nugget strategy":

Here we treat the psalm as a mine for nuggets of spiritual gold. We wander or dig through the psalm until some verse catches our eye. When it does, we extract that verse and put it in our collection of spiritual valuables.⁵

But think for a moment and consider: is that what Psalm 119 was written for? A spiritual treasure hunt? Of course not! It was intended for devotional use, to help focus our affections on God by delighting in his word. But instead of using it that way, we impatiently pan for nuggets.

⁴ John Eaton, *Psalms of the Way and the Kingdom: A Conference with the Commentaries*, JSOTSS 199, Sheffield, 1995, p. 52.

⁵ Ash, 18.

Psalm 119 actually isn't that long. It's only 176 lines. You can pray the whole thing in fifteen minutes, while on a short walk, for example. It takes Roman Catholics about fifteen minutes to pray the rosary. Long, long before the Catholic church began using prayer beads to promote devotion to Mary, Psalm 119 was a kind of Bible-focused rosary, to promote the central theme of the Psalms, i.e. delighting in God's Word. Praying it is fifteen minutes well spent.

Another difficulty with Psalm 119 is that, to the untrained eye, the verses can feel pretty random. In fact, because it's an alphabetical acrostic, we expect it to be random, since our own alphabet books for children are almost always random nonsense, e.g. "BIG Z, little z, what begins with Z? I do. I'm Zizzer-Zazzer-Zuzz as you can plainly see."⁶

It's tempting to think of Psalm 119 as simply a Hebrew version of Dr. Seuss, intended to help kids learn their letters. However, the lines of Psalm 119 aren't random. For those with the patience to read the whole thing, there's a flow that emerges.

For example, consider the dark mood of vv 81-88, at the end the first half of the psalm. All the lines in this section begin with כ (Koph, the Hebrew letter K). It is the bleakest part of the psalm, what Charles Spurgeon called Ps 119's "midnight." The wicked had persecuted the psalmist to the point that he was at death's door: "They have almost made an end of me on earth, but I have not forsaken your precepts. In your steadfast love give me life, that I may keep the testimonies of your mouth" (vv 87-88). Then comes a major turning point, and the second half of the psalm begins in v 89. These are the lines beginning with ל (Lamedh, the Hebrew letter L). In vv 89-91, the psalmist argues that God created the whole cosmos by his powerful word, and all creation continues to hold together because of God's word. Then in vv 92-93, the psalmist realizes that, just like the universe, he was created and will survive because of God's word. He says, "If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life."

Of course, with this re-affirmation of faith in vv 92-93, the psalmist isn't out of the woods yet. Through the second half of Psalm 119 he will still encounter affliction and opposition, as well as his own ongoing struggle with sin. But the turning point has given him confidence. From this point forward, because the universe is firmly established by God's Word, the psalmist can also rest securely in God's Word forever.

HEART TROUBLE

Yet there's still a third challenge in making use of Psalm 119. It is the biggest problem of all. It's us. Ever since humanity fell into sin, we have been bent, crooked, curved down away from God. Instead of looking up to him as loving Father, we've been hiding from him as a criminal might do before the judge. We're not inclined to meditate on God's word day and night, because our hearts don't delight in the Lord.

⁶ Theodor Geisel, *Dr. Seuss's ABC: An Amazing Alphabet Book!* Random House, 1963.

During the Babylonian exile, the prophet Jeremiah meditated on the two ways described in Psalm 1. See Jeremiah 17:5-9. Jeremiah grieved over the disastrous consequences of God's people choosing to walk in the way of the wicked, and being blown away to Babylon like chaff in the wind. In light of this sad outcome, Jeremiah wrote: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9). That's the crux of the problem. Jeremiah captured it. We don't delight in God because our hearts are desperately sick. We need new hearts.

At roughly the same time, another prophet named Ezekiel looked forward to a day when God would give his people heart transplants:

[26] And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. [27] And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

That old heart of stone was dead set on murmuring only the counsel of the wicked, echoing curses and deadly counsel. Without God's intervention, there would be no hope of enjoying the blessed life. But Ezekiel could see what God was going to do through the death and resurrection of Jesus. For all who believe in Jesus are given heart transplants, removing the heart of stone and replacing it with a soft, new heart, a heart inclined to delight in God. And because of Pentecost, all who believe in Jesus are given the Holy Spirit, who changes the murmurs of our hearts. No longer echoing the counsel of the wicked, but instead delighting in God's Word. Again: "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Ezekiel 36:27).

Want to know whether you've been filled with the Holy Spirit? Want a clear sign? Your heart is changed, and you (at least want to) delight in God's Word.

In fact, the Holy Spirit is very closely linked with God's Word in the Bible. For example, when Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he encouraged them to speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, by not getting filled up with wine, but by getting filled up with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5). When Paul said the same thing to the Colossians, encouraging them to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, instead of exhorting them to be filled with the HS he said "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col 3). For Paul, the two are virtually interchangeable.

This helps us understand why Jesus chose to pour out the Spirit on the church on the Feast of Pentecost. After all, Pentecost wasn't a new holiday, invented by Christians. It was an ancient celebration dating back to the time of the Exodus. Fifty days after Passover, there was fire on Mt Sinai and God came down, giving his law to Moses and the people. In the same way, fifty days after Jesus passed over from death into life, there were tongues of fire over the disciples as God came down and delivered his Spirit to his people. Then when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, they went out speaking God's Word in the languages of all who were

gathered there (Acts 2:11). The Spirit of God empowers believers to delight in the Word of God.

WORDS OF SPIRIT AND LIFE

The Twelve Apostles who followed Jesus weren't always the brightest of students. But they were clued in enough to sense the struggle of faith, the challenge of being bent crooked by sin, and delighting in many things other than God's Word. After Jesus fed the 5,000, the multitudes didn't respond by delighting in the Lord. They quarreled with Jesus because they delighted in his fish and chips and wanted it for supper every night. Jesus told the crowds, "I am the bread of life." He was encouraging them to feed on him and on his word. He went on to say, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). Blessed are those who delight in Jesus, and who meditate on his word day and night.

Jesus' response was too much for the crowds. They scattered because the free meals were over. Yet as the multitudes scattered, Jesus' apostles for once showed that they understood their need and Jesus' provision. Jesus said to them, "Do you want to go away as well?" Peter answered for them, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

That's the key to the blessed life! The word of the Lord, the words of eternal life. Blessed are those who delight in God's word, and meditate on it day and night. Through Jesus' gift of a new heart and a new spirit, we can indeed delight in God and in his word.

They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey dripping from the comb. Moreover, by them, your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Psalm 19:10-11)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you feel about the Bible? Why?
2. What does Psalm 1:2 say is the key to the blessed life? How is this idea illustrated in Psalm 1:3?
3. Read Psalm 19 (not 119) aloud. How does Psalm 19 amplify Psalm 1?
4. Discuss how Psalm 119 structured and organized. To whom is it addressed?
5. Read Psalm 119:89-92. How does this section reprise Psalm 19 and Psalm 1?
6. Discuss similarities between the gift of the law to Moses at Mt. Sinai, and the gift of the Spirit to the Twelve on Pentecost. What significance do you see in the close connection between God's Word and the Holy Spirit in the Bible?
7. How is Jesus a model for delighting in God's Word?