

Psalm 119:89-104: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Psalm 119, verses 89 to 104. Lamed. Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.

Your faithfulness endures to all generations. You have established the earth, and it stands fast. By your appointment they stand this day, for all things are your servants.

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. I am yours, save me, for I have sought your precepts. The wicked lie in wait to destroy me, but I consider your testimonies. I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad. Mame.

O, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.

[1 : 01] I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word. I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me.

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. Through your precepts I get understanding. Therefore I hate every false way. Psalm 119 is a lengthy meditation upon the law.

It is a reflection that some commentators have suggested may once have concluded the Psalter. It is an acrostic psalm with 22 sections of 8 verses each, each beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and playing upon seven largely interchangeable synonyms for the law, features that would have served the end of memorization, and have given a sense of completeness. It invites the person singing it to meditate and reflect more deeply upon the law, and to gain wisdom in the process. It has many of the characteristics of lament, as the psalmist finds himself under assault, but clings to the law of God throughout.

It brings the law of God to bear upon the psalmist's situation and needs, revealing in the process the promissory aspects of the law. As the psalmist trusts in the Lord by clinging to the wisdom, truth, goodness, promise, presence, and grace extended in his gift of the law, he confidently looks to the Lord for deliverance.

[2 : 27] The law is the self-manifesting gift of God, and has become the focal point of the psalmist's loyalty. Seeing such an emphasis upon the law, and the various expressions of the psalmist's faithful commitment to it, many Christians might suspect the psalmist of works righteousness.

However, as Gordon Wenham argues, this is to miss the prayerful character of this psalm, and the psalmist's frequent recognition of his own faults and failings. There is idealism and realism held side by side.

The psalmist both expresses his deep commitment to the law, and also his failings in keeping it. Wenham cites John Eaton, who describes the psalm as a sustained work of prayer and communion.

A person who has loved the Lord and treasured his guidance is now ill-used by powerful people, and brought near to the borders of death. So the prayer for new life rises, supported by the great stream of affirmations about the Lord's word and promise, teaching, and commandments.

How the sufferer has loved and followed it, and longs to know it better. These considerations are not urged in the spirit of one who is blameless. There is almost a contradiction between the claims to have kept the Lord's law, and the readiness to admit inadequacy and erring from the path.

[3 : 40] If it is a contradiction, it is a common experience, years of devotion and loyalty, yet shot through with deviation, and perceived in deep moments to be quite inadequate. Wenham notes the way that Psalm 119 functions as a prayer, a sort of practice of faithful self-commitment to God and

the ways of his law.

He writes, Prayer necessarily involves the worshipper in a more profound way than does listening to a law, proverb, story, or sermon. Praying commits the worshipper to the values and standards that he articulates in his prayer.

He also writes, In praying the Psalms, one is actively committing oneself to following the God-approved life. This is different from just listening to laws or edifying stories.

It is an action akin to reciting the creed or singing a hymn. It involves strong commitment, and this is why I think that the Psalms have been so influential in moulding Jewish and Christian ethics in the past, and why as scholars, we should again study them for their ethical content.

The twelfth section of the Psalm focuses on the trustworthiness and certainty of God's word, associating this with the acts of God's creation, by which he established the earth and the heavens.

[4 : 55] There is an association here that is drawn also in places such as Psalm 19. God's word endures, and all his creations are the servants of that word. The psalmist is one of these servants also, and much as the rest of the creatures of God endure on account of his word, so he finds strength, endurance, life, and salvation from the law of his creator, to whom he belongs, and upon whom he depends.

All other things in creation are limited or incomplete in their perfections. However, the commandment of the law to which the psalmist looks is unbounded. The thirteenth stanza is a meditation upon the law as a source of wisdom.

The psalmist begins by expressing his love for the law and his constant meditation upon it. He observes the law in the fullest sense of that word, not only obeying it, but being deeply attentive to and reflective upon it.

Love for the commandment of the Lord is a sign of true fulfillment of the law. The law was always to be fulfilled in love. Love for the Lord led to delight in his law, as we see in Deuteronomy 6, verses 5-9.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise.

[6 : 20] You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. The law is the great source of wisdom for the psalmist, requiring and rewarding sustained reflection and deep meditation.

Wisdom is insight into reality. Those who begin with fear of the Lord and delight in his law have light upon reality that others lack. Israel was promised in Deuteronomy 4 that the law would be the source of their wisdom in the eyes of the nations.

The law given by the Lord illumines natural law. On account of his attention to the law, the psalmist has outstripped the cunning of his enemies, the understanding of his teachers and the wisdom even of the aged, because God himself has given him insight within his law.

His commitment to God's rules protects him from evil and from folly, which on account of his delight in the law of the Lord, he discerns, hates and eschews. The Lord is his true teacher and his word is like rich food that enlightens the psalmist's eyes.

A question to consider. How does God's revealed word relate to the natural law that the wise seek out?