

Psalm 119:1-24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 119 verses 1 to 24 Aleph I will praise you with an upright heart when I learn your righteous rules.

I will keep your statutes. Do not utterly forsake me. Baith How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.

With my whole heart I seek you. Let me not wander from your commandments. I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O Lord. Teach me your statutes.

With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways.

I will delight in your statutes. I will not forget your word. Gimel Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word.

[1 : 3 1] Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. I am a sojourner on the earth. Hide not your commandments from me. My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times.

You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones who wander from your commandments. Take away from me scorn and contempt, for I have kept your testimonies.

Even though princes sit plotting against me, your servant will meditate on your statutes. Your testimonies are my delight. They are my counsellors. Psalm 119 is the longest of all of the psalms, 176 verses in length.

It's structured as an alphabetical acrostic. There are 22 sections of 8 verses each. Each section begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in ascending order. As an alphabetical acrostic, it suggests a comprehensive character and invites a certain sort of meditation.

Each of the fundamental springs of language, the letters of the alphabet, are successively and collectively turned to the praise of God and his law. Psalm 119 is an extended meditation upon the law.

[2 : 4 6] Beyond the acrostic structure, its core literary design is a series of explorations of the term law or instruction, Torah, and seven key synonyms, translated in the ESV as testimonies, precepts, commandments, rules, words, statutes and promise.

A few other terms, ways, paths, faithfulness, are used at a handful of points. Verse 122 stands out as a verse without any of the synonyms or related terms.

Every stanza of the psalm contains at least six of the synonyms. The psalm elevates the law of the Lord, much as we see in places such as Psalm 19, verses 7-11.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart.

The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The rules of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

[3 : 49] More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold. Sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned. In keeping them, there is great reward.

Such meditation upon the law of the Lord is celebrated in the opening psalm of the book, which the blessed man ruminates upon day and night. This psalm should be read as a wisdom psalm, an invitation to place the law of God in the heart through memorization, meditation, insight, delight, willing obedience, and then also in song.

The understanding of the law that emerges from it may surprise many, who have been given to think of the law as a negative and condemning thing. However, the new covenant is about having the law of God written on the heart, and this is what Psalm 119 is all about.

This is what the law was always supposed to be, and this psalm can be read as an anticipation of how the law ought to be experienced in the new covenant. This psalm seems incredibly repetitive and redundant to many, but James Mays argues against this.

He writes, The psalm has been called artificial and boring. Such comments are blind to the aesthetic and psychological effect of this combination of repetition and variation.

[5 : 05] The psalm is meant to be read aloud to others, or to oneself, so that the repetitions guide the hearing and the variations enchant the imagination. It establishes a focus of contemplation and evokes the mood of concentration and submission in which meditation occurs.

In liturgical and devotional use, only a part of the psalm, often one eight-line section, is read. Because of the way the parts are composed, each part can stand for the whole, but the whole is needed to reach the effect of fulfilment.

Alan Ross helpfully summarises the message of the entire psalm as follows. Finding himself in persecution from powerful people who ridicule his faith in an effort to shame him into abandoning it, the psalmist strengthens himself by his detailed meditations on the word of the Lord, which is his comfort, his prized possession, his rule of life, his resource for strength, and his message of hope, all of which inspire him to desire it even more, to live by it, and to pray for its fulfilment.

The first stanza of the psalm begins with the blessedness of those walking in and keeping the law and seeking the Lord. This is reminiscent of Psalm 1, with which the Psalter opens, with its initial emphasis upon the way that someone walks in.

The law needs to be kept with diligence and attentiveness. The Lord calls people to observe his commandments. Attentiveness, watchfulness, carefulness, and other such traits are thereby related to obedience.

[6 : 34] The righteous person is a person deeply mindful of his or her way. Faithfully observing the law of the Lord, the psalmist anticipates enjoyment of the Lord's promised blessing and deliverance.

The second stanza focuses upon the integrity and singleness of heart that meditation upon the law gives. It begins with the young man, as in the book of Proverbs. Like Proverbs, this is wisdom material.

The law and the fear of the Lord, with which it is faithfully received, is the beginning of wisdom. The psalmist devotes his entire self and life to God's word. This is a devotion arising out of the praise expressed at the beginning of verse 12.

He stores up God's word in his heart through memory and will not forget it. He declares God's rules with his lips. He meditates and delights upon God's testimonies within.

He fixes his eyes upon God's ways. All of this is an antidote to sin. To avoid wickedness, we need to make the law of God not merely our burden and responsibility, but our delight.

[7 : 36] This should be what Thomas Chalmers calls the expulsive power of a new affection. If we want to pursue purity, we must cultivate delight in God and his word. The third stanza presents the righteous person clinging on to God's word in a world where he is afflicted by foes and surrounded by wicked persons.

He depends upon God's gracious action and deliverance, so that he can live as God's servant. He asks for opened eyes and illumination to see wondrous things out of your law.

The law is a reservoir of deep and glorious mysteries. Its greatest treasures are not scattered on the surface, but require digging down. It is as we begin to see the deeper order and logic of the law that it ceases to be merely a set of seemingly arbitrary commandments and comes to be seen as the richest mine of wisdom.

As a sojourner, the psalmist is dependent upon the Lord and his instruction and protection. It is to the Lord and to his law that he turns when he is threatened by enemies. A question to consider.

What would be some examples of the wondrous things that can be seen in the law of the Lord?

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