

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Psalm 119 - The importance of God's Word: Aleph - Psalm 119:1-8

Good morning! Today we start a new series on Psalm 119. As many people know, Psalm 119 is the longest of the psalms - it has a full 176 verses! As you can imagine, we will be studying this psalm bit by bit, not all 176 verses in one go! In fact, Psalm 119 is nicely divided for us into 22 sections of 8 verses each, with each section corresponding to one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

It's a so-called "acrostic" psalm. Psalm 119:1-8 in the original Hebrew text all start with a Hebrew letter "a" (Aleph), and so on. This was probably a memory aid, as it's a lot easier to memorise things if you can attach them to a simple structure in your mind. Of course, it's very difficult to reproduce this effect in an English translation! Today we will look at the "Aleph" section, Psalm 119:1-8.

What is Psalm 119 all about? Really, just one theme - the excellency and value of the Word of God. It is full of verses explaining the benefit of God's Word, expressing a desire to keep it, asking for help to live according to it, and so on. The great Victorian preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote a commentary on Psalm 119, and in it he quoted some very helpful advice given by one Philip Henry, who was the father of Matthew Henry who wrote the famous commentary on the whole Bible. What Spurgeon actually quoted was part of Matthew Henry's account of his father Philip, which said this: "Once, pressing the study of the Scriptures, he advised us to take a verse of this Psalm every morning to meditate upon, and so go over the Psalm twice in the year; 'and that', saith he, 'will bring you to be in love with all the rest of the Scriptures.' He often said, 'All grace grows as love to the word of God grows.'" This advice of Philip Henry is very good advice indeed, because it is somewhat difficult to see an overarching structure in Psalm 119, and so it can seem daunting at the first sight. However, looking at one verse a day really helps to increase our love and respect for the Word of God, as Philip Henry said it would.

Spurgeon himself was hesitant when he came to write a commentary on Psalm 119. In his fifth volume of *The Treasury of David*, in the preface he said, "I have been bewildered in the expanse of the One Hundred and Nineteenth Psalm, which makes up the bulk of this volume. Its dimensions and its depth alike overcame me. It spread itself out before me like a vast, rolling prairie, to which I could see no bound, and this alone created a feeling of dismay. Its expanse was unbroken by a bluff or headland, and hence it threatened a monotonous task, although the fear has not been realized." He goes on to say, "I have now crossed the great plain for myself, but not without persevering, and, I will add, pleasurable, toil. ... Those who have never studied it may pronounce it commonplace, and complain of its repetitions; but to the thoughtful student it is like the great deep, full, so as never to be measured; and varied, so as never to weary the eye." So you can see how Spurgeon came to see the wonderful blessing of this unique Psalm. I hope we will also enjoy it together and gain much benefit from it as we study it bit by bit on *Truth for Today*.

Another great evangelical Christian of a similar time to that of Charles Spurgeon was Charles Bridges, and he also wrote a commentary on Psalm 119. In it he said, "The Writer is free to confess, that his main design in the study of this Psalm was to furnish a correct standard of Evangelical sincerity for the habitual scrutiny of his own heart". In other words, what he was saying was that he was principally concerned with listening to the Word of God and seeing what it had to say **to him**, before teaching others. That is a very good and helpful attitude. We remember that in Hebrews 4:12-13, the Apostle writes that "*the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.*"

When we read and study the Word of God, we need first and foremost to see and understand what it is saying **to us**. Once again I'm going to read from Spurgeon, who himself was quoting Augustine on the subject of Psalm 119: "it seemeth not to need an expositor, but only a reader and a listener." That's interesting, isn't it? Not so much an expositor, but just someone who is willing to read it and then listen to what it is saying. This is excellent advice on how to approach Psalm 119. It isn't really a complicated psalm, full of mysteries and difficulties. Instead, it is simple and direct, and it speaks to our hearts and to our consciences. Reading it bit by bit, and meditating on it, as Philip Henry recommended, will be a very good way of being "a reader and a listener", as Augustine proposed.

Let's start then with Psalm 119:1-8. I will read them from the New King James Version:

"Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart! They also do no iniquity; they walk in His ways. You have commanded us to keep Your precepts diligently. Oh, that my ways were directed to keep Your statutes! Then I would not be ashamed, when I look into all Your commandments. I will praise You with uprightness of heart, when I learn Your righteous judgments. I will keep Your statutes; oh, do not forsake me utterly!"

Let's begin with a few principles and thoughts that will help us understand the psalm. First of all, let's consider all these different words for God's Word that we came across: "*law*", "*testimony*", "*ways*", "*precept*", "*statute*", and so on. Some expositors think that these words all have different shades of meaning, and that they bring out one or other particular aspect of the Word of God. Others seem to suggest that they may be synonyms for the Word of God. One would have to do several word studies, looking up each time these specific words are used in the Old Testament to see if there are particular meanings associated with them. Personally, I think that it is likely that the different words were used for a reason. We could probably get some help on these words by looking at Psalm 19, as opposed to Psalm 119, where a good many of these different words are used together with a practical explanation for each of them.

Let me read Psalm 19:7-9 in the New King James Version: *"The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes 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 judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether."*

I find that from Psalm 19:7-9 are very helpful because they give some explanation about the words used to describe God's Word. For example, the **law** is spoken of as perfect and converting the soul. The "**law**" is in some sense the whole of God's Word, showing us what God requires. The word for law, "*torah*", can mean "*instruction*". We know, of course, that we cannot be converted by **keeping** the law (see Romans 3:20-22). That is why the Lord Jesus came to be our Saviour - but it is the **law**, i.e. God's Word, that instructs us and tells us what we need to know. The **testimony** of the Lord is said to be sure - that means that what God has witnessed, or testified, about Himself is reliable. And that means that we can take Him at His word. We will never be deceived if we trust in God's testimony. The **statutes** of the LORD are said to be right - so what God commands commends itself because it is righteous. And so we can continue, looking at these different terms for God's word and the meanings attached to them.

But let's get back to Psalm 119, and just before we embark on Psalm 119:1-8, we might be interested to know who wrote this psalm. Well, actually, we don't know, because no name is given! Charles Spurgeon thought that it was David, and he made an interesting suggestion: "The earlier verses are of such a character as to lend themselves to the hypothesis that the author was a young man, while many of the later passages could only have suggested themselves to age and wisdom". So it's a bit like the psalm being David's spiritual journal through his life. Whether that was so or not, we simply don't know, but it's an interesting idea, and it fits in well with Philip Henry's suggestion of reading and meditating on one verse of this psalm a day. We can make it into a sort of journal for ourselves as we go through the psalm, learning more about God's word.

Of course, what we **do** know is that the author was an Old Testament writer. That's obvious enough, of course (!), but I mention it because it leads to an important point. It's important because we now live in a different time to the Old Testament, now that the Lord Jesus has come, and lived and died, and risen again. In the Old Testament, faithful men and women sought to obey God's law. Keeping the law was what was required. Of course, no-one could do so perfectly, and so God's grace was always necessary. But the point was, God was testing His people under the law.

He knew that they couldn't keep it, but they needed to learn that for themselves. In Romans 3:20-22, the Apostle Paul says, *"Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe."* That is why Jesus came to die for us. Now, we live in the power of His Spirit. He is the One who enables us to keep His requirements.

We live in the day of grace. It's important to remember that when we read the Psalms. On the one hand, we must remember the Old Testament context in which the Psalms were written, and on the other hand, we wear "New Testament glasses", so to speak, so that we can be blessed and instructed by considering the sentiments of the Psalms in terms of the day of grace in which we live.

The Psalmist starts by stating the blessedness, or happiness, of those who are *"undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD, who keep His testimonies and who seek Him with a whole heart"* (Psalm 119:1). Today, in the day of grace, the same principle applies. Consider these verses from John 14:23, and John 15:9-11:

"Jesus answered and said to him, 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him'" (John 14:23, New King James Version).

"As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:9-11, New King James Version).

There is a joy promised by the Lord Jesus to those who keep His words, just as the psalmist spoke about the blessedness of those who walked in the law of the LORD (Psalm 119:1). If we do not keep His ways; if we sin, we know that we can confess this and repent, as John assures us in his 1 John 1:9: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* But when we sin, we grieve the Holy Spirit. We do not lose our salvation, but we lose the enjoyment of it. We don't experience the blessedness that the psalmist speaks of. One secret is no doubt the end of Psalm 119:2, to seek God with the whole heart. It's a good question for me to ask myself: am I whole-hearted?

Psalm 119:3 says that these blessed people do no iniquity. Of course, no one is perfect. John tells us that in 1 John 1:8: *"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."* But insofar as we rely on the strength of the Holy Spirit, we can seek to act in our new nature, which does not want to sin. 1 John 3:9 tells us, *"Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God."* This is very encouraging! We have been given a new nature that **wants** to walk in God's ways, even as Ephesians 4:24 tells us: *"and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness."*

Going back to Psalm 119, Psalm 119:4-5 express a standard, and then a longing on the part of the psalmist that he could reach that standard: *"You have commanded us to keep Your precepts diligently. Oh, that my ways were directed to keep Your statutes!"* In the day of the Law, this would no doubt have been the experience of godly men and women - they knew that God expected them to keep His law, but they also knew that they could not do it perfectly.

Paul experienced the same thing in Romans 7: *"For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members."* (Romans 7:22-23). Now we live in a privileged time. Jesus has kept the law, and He has borne all our sins. He is the One who is able! Take time to read Romans 8:1-17, to see how this is clearly explained by the Apostle Paul.

In Psalm 119:6 the psalmist says, *"Then I would not be ashamed, when I look into all Your commandments."* The psalmist is saying that if his ways were really directed to keep God's statutes, then, when he read them, he would not be ashamed, because they would commend him rather than condemn him. What about us? How does this sentiment of the psalmist apply to us, in our day? We also need not be ashamed, if we trust and rely on the Lord Jesus.

John exhorts us to abide in Him, in 1 John 2:28, so that we won't be ashamed. He writes, *"And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming."*

In Psalm 119:7-8, the psalmist expresses a desire: *"I will praise You with uprightness of heart, when I learn Your righteous judgments. I will keep Your statutes; oh, do not forsake me utterly!"* Here we need to bring in a wonderful New Testament truth that encourages us. We know that we will **never** be forsaken, so that we do not need to fear that this might happen. We are told this plainly in Hebrews 13:5: *"For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'"*

Therefore we can seek to learn more and more about God and His Word, knowing that He will always be present for our help and blessing. Like the psalmist, we will praise God more and more as we learn more and more about His word.

Let's briefly re-cap some of what we have learnt together about Psalm 119.

- We thought about how Psalm 119 is all about the excellency of God's word, and we considered Philip Henry's advice about taking one verse every day and meditating on it, so that we grow in our appreciation of God's word.
- We also thought about how Psalm 119 is not complicated, but "needs a reader and a listener", as Augustine said.
- We looked at the various words used to describe God's word, such as "law", "testimony", "statute" etc., and we saw that we might get help on working out the different shades of meaning by reading Psalm 19.
- We also reminded ourselves that the psalm was written in the Old Testament times, and that we need to remember that we live in a day of grace, where our salvation is not dependent on keeping the law.

- With that in mind, we briefly studied Psalm 119:1-8, considering what New Testament counterparts there were to the sentiments expressed in the psalm.

I hope that my simple comments will have encouraged us as we consider this great psalm, and that they will have given us a desire to read it and to gain the benefit that it can give us. God willing, we will continue to study the psalm in its eight-verse sections at various times in the *Truth for Today* schedule. In this current mini series, we will be considering the section for the letter "Beth", Psalm 119:9-16, next week, and then the section for "Gimel", Psalm 119:17-24, the week after that.

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