

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Psalm 119 - The importance of God's Word: Beth - Psalm 119:9-16

Where do you go to for advice about life? How do you decide what you will do and what you won't? On what basis do you make those decisions? I guess that for most of us, our values and principles are shaped by a number of sources. Usually parents have a big influence on what we think is important. The society we live in has values that will have an impact on how we think. Friends, extended family and perhaps even social media play a role in shaping the person you are.

But how do you know if your system of values is good or not? Whether you consider yourself a religious person or not, I suspect most people want to live a good life. Most people don't want to waste their life. How can we live a life that is good and fulfilling? What will keep us from ruining our lives and wasting them?

Our study today is about a man who asked exactly that question, and we'll think about the answer he gives. We're continuing our series looking at the importance of God's word in Psalm 119, and in Psalm 119:9, the psalmist asks "*How can a young man cleanse his way?*" and then in the rest of the section we'll consider today, he gives his answer. His answer, "*By taking heed according to Your word*", is given immediately and then expanded upon in Psalm 119:10-16.

For the psalmist, God's word was to be the most important influence on his life. What he learnt in the Scripture was to impact on his life more than the advice of anyone else. For him, any other influences were useful only in so far as they gave advice in line with the teaching of Scripture. It's worth noting at the start of our broadcast that only a small selection of the books of the Old Testament would have been available to the psalmist. For us today, God's will is revealed to us in a fuller and more complete way, through the teaching of the rest of the Old Testament and, most importantly, the New Testament.

The psalmist's advice is just as true for us today. The only way to live a life that is pleasing to God, and not wasted, is to live according to God's word. Many of your friends and neighbours might scoff at such a statement. Who would live their lives following the teaching of a dusty old relic? For them, the Bible is no more than a really old collection of fairy tales and myths. If anyone listening today has that view of the Bible, could I encourage you to pick it up and read it again? Of course, there are parts that are difficult to understand and seem strange to our 21st Century way of thinking, but the Bible declares that God's word 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*" (Hebrews 4:12). Why not read the Bible, and see if it has anything to say about the intents of your heart? You'll find, like many millions over the years, that God's word really is living and powerful and relevant to us today.

You might be aware that Psalm 119 is split into 22 sections, each containing eight verses. Each of the sections corresponds to one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and in each section each of the eight verses starts with that letter of the alphabet. Perhaps the psalmist wrote this long Psalm about the word of God like this so that it would be easier for people to memorise the Psalm. If that's the case, it's a little reminder of the importance that Jews in the Old Testament placed on learning the Scriptures by heart. Memorisation is a hard task. It's certainly not easy, and it's made harder by the fact that nowadays we haven't been taught to memorise by heart from a very young age, as they would have been in Old Testament days. However, later on this morning we'll see the benefits that learning the Scriptures, and hiding them in our hearts will have on our lives. You don't need to start by memorising huge chunks of Scripture at once. Even, learning one verse a month would soon enough give you a treasury of wisdom stored up in your minds. Remember, I'm not encouraging learning parts of the Bible for the sake of completeness. There are no prizes for memorising the whole Bible by heart. What matters is what we do with the verses as the Holy Spirit reminds us of them as we go about our lives. Even just a few verses stored in our minds and meditated on and acted upon as we are involved in our daily business might make a huge difference to our lives.

As I've already pointed out, our section of Psalm 119 for today covers Psalm 119:9-16. It's not always possible or helpful to split the section up into exact sections to analyse, especially when studying the Psalms. After all, the psalms were Hebrew poems, and poems or songs don't always have the same exact logical structure that other forms of writing might have. However, it's probably helpful to notice a few general points about the verses before we look at them in more detail. We've already noticed that the section starts with a question, "*How can a young man cleanse his*

way?" (Psalm 119:9). In the psalmist's expanded answer, given in Psalm 119:10-16, you'll notice:

- Four things the psalmist **has done** in Psalm 119: 10-14 and
- Four things that the psalmist **will do** in Psalm 119:15-16.

We'll cover each of the actual things as we go through the verses, but this reminded me that living according to God's Word is an ongoing process. Things that the psalmist did in the past were now going to help him live in the present. But equally, his past experiences and actions didn't guarantee his current faithfulness. So, in Psalm 119:15-16 he makes the four declarations of things he would do. Living a life that is pleasing to God requires continual diligence. It's interesting, too, that the things we do now will affect our ability to live faithfully in the future. If our current actions are like those of Psalm 119:10-14, then that will help keep us in the right frame of mind, and in dependence on God, so that in the future we can make the bold declarations of Psalm 119:15-16. Thankfully, that doesn't mean that if our past has been less than ideal, or even if our current actions haven't been as faithful to God as we might like all hope is lost. The advice we get in today's sections of Psalm 119 can be put into practice at any point in life, and needs to be put into practice in a fresh way each day.

Let's pay more specific attention to the Psalm then. Psalm 119:9 reads, *"How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word."*

The beginning of Psalm 119, which was considered in last week's broadcast, reminded us that those who are undefiled in the way, and who keep God's testimonies and seek Him with their whole hearts are blessed. No doubt the question in Psalm 119:9 follows on from this and asks "How can I experience that kind of blessing?" or "How can I live that kind of life?" It's a good question to ask. Psalm 119:1-8 describe the great blessing of living in the way God says is best. What a good response to want to live that way! Perhaps it would be good for all of us to ask ourselves again today, whether we are really living according to God's word? If not, let's like the psalmist try to get some help from the verses in today's section.

What does living according to God's word look like? Now we know the psalmist's answer for how to keep our way clean, how do we do it? Psalm 119:10-14 give us a picture of what our lives will look like if we live according to God's word. As I've already pointed out, the section is built around four occurrences of the phrase *"I have"*. As we look at each one, let's ask ourselves the question of whether we could say with the psalmist *"I have"* in relation to each action. If not, let's do so today!

We'll start by considering Psalm 119:10. *"With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!"*

The first way to live according to God's word, is to seek after Him with our whole hearts. This would have been familiar to the Jewish readers. They would remember that Deuteronomy told them: *"You shall love the LORD our God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength"* (Deuteronomy 6:5).

In fact the book of Deuteronomy reminds them to serve the LORD with all their hearts five times in total (Deuteronomy 6:5, 10:12, 11:13, 13:3, 30:6) and Joshua reminds them of it as well (Joshua 22:5). You can download a transcript of this message from our website if you want to check out those references for yourself. God wants His people to follow Him with a whole heart. He doesn't want us to be drawn away after other things. He wants whole-hearted devotion!

Perhaps, like me, you feel that there are so many things in life that demand your attention and take up your time. Some things are necessary, like family responsibilities and work commitments and financial matters; others claim our attention through their interest to us in things like sports, politics, fashion, TV and perhaps many more. With so many possibilities that claim on our attention, how much we, like the psalmist need to pray, *"Oh, let me not wonder from Your commandments."* The challenge for us is not to let these various "other things", no matter how legitimate, overtake God in our priorities. God is to have the first place in our hearts, and our seeking after Him is to colour every other sphere of our lives. Not that we can have no other interests or responsibilities, but that our actions are all to be influenced by our seeking God with our whole hearts. Seeking after God is to make a difference in how I act with my family, or in my job, or in pursuing my interest in sport for example.

Consider with me, the second of the psalmist's "I have" statements which is found in Psalm 119:11; *"Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You."*

Someone has said of this verse that it's "the best thing in the best place for the best reason". The best thing, God's word, is hidden in the best place, our hearts, for the best reason, that we might not sin against God. The verse presents us with some challenges. What do we fill our hearts with? As we've already mentioned, so many things cry out for our attention. It occurred to me recently that I know more about sports than is really necessary. That's because

I like watching and reading about competitive sports, whether that's football, cricket, rugby or a whole host of other sports. Nothing wrong with that in itself. God graciously allows us to enjoy many things. But I realised that whilst I had fairly detailed awareness of what was going on across many of the top sports leagues in the UK and spent considerable amounts of time each day reading up on match reports etc., I probably didn't always spend anywhere near as much time reading the Bible and thinking about its content. Other listeners may not have the same interest in sports but may be able to quote lyrics for hundreds of songs without even thinking about it. Or perhaps you're very aware of all the latest goings on in the world of movie stars and other celebrities. Again, let me be clear, nothing at all is wrong with having interests, and I'm not suggesting the only legitimate use of spare time is reading the Bible. Certainly not! But I am saying that God's word should certainly have a high importance in a believer's life. Realising that I'd been spending too much time interested in sports, reminded me of the privilege we have of having the Bible available for us to read in this country. What a great blessing to have written down for us the things God wants us to know. At the end of the day, knowing which teams got relegated from each of the UK football league divisions is essentially useless, but God's word is not like that. May the Lord help me, and all of our listeners this morning, to truly value His word.

A second challenge from our verse is "what do we do with God's word?" If you have a Bible, what do you do with it? Does it sit on the shelf gathering dust only to come out at special occasions? Perhaps you read it every week at a church gathering, but by the time you get home you couldn't even remember what part of the Bible was read? Maybe you read it every day, but as soon as you leave the door you've forgotten what you read. The psalmist says he hides God's word in his heart. He values God's word. He treats it as precious. He lets it sink down into his heart. He retains what he has read. Wouldn't it be good if that was our desire? Keep God's word in your heart! Of course, I'm sure we all have days where our uptake is better than others, but let's determine as much as we can to let God's word take root in our hearts. There are many things you could do to help with this. Perhaps you could learn some of the verses you read. Maybe you could write one of them down and keep the piece of paper with you through the day and look at it and think about it from time to time during the day. Others keep notes of what they read. No doubt there are many other ways to help us retain more of what we read.

What effect does God's word have in our lives? The psalmist didn't hide God's word in his heart so that he could win Bible trivia quizzes or so that he could impress people with his great knowledge. He didn't even primarily hide God's word in his heart so that he could teach other people. First and foremost, he hid God's word in his heart so that he wouldn't sin against God. His first concern was to sin less, and live a life that pleased God. Let's keep that in mind as we read the Scriptures. No matter what other benefits may come from a greater knowledge of God's word, firstly it is to transform our lives, and make us more like Christ and help us sin less. No wonder the psalmist adds a prayer at this point: "*Blessed are You, O Lord! Teach me Your statutes*" (Psalm 119:12).

The psalmist had hidden God's word in his heart and the knowledge he does have causes him to bless God. That's a good response. As you read the Scriptures today and over the coming week, I pray that it will lead you to praise and worship God. Then the psalmist adds a request that God would teach him His statutes (Psalm 119:12). Oh, that we would have a similar hunger for God's word!

Psalm 119:13 gives us the psalmist's third "I have" statement. "*With my lips I have declared all the judgments of Your mouth.*"

Here is a third consequence of taking heed according to God's word. We've seen that part of a correct response to God's word is to seek God with our whole hearts. We've also seen the importance of hiding God's word in our hearts. Now the psalmist is bringing out to us a fresh point. A proper response to God's word is to share it with others. The psalmist used his lips to declare all the judgements of God's mouth. He obviously couldn't do that unless he had first sought after God and read His word and hidden it in his heart. Having done that, now the psalmist felt compelled to pass on what he had learnt to others. What a good response to God's word!

When we considered Psalm 119:11-12, we focused on a personal consequence of reading God's word. It helps us to sin less. Now the focus is on a benefit for other people from our reading of God's word. What form our declaring of God's judgements takes will vary from person to person. Some are involved in public preaching. But that's not the only setting in which we can tell others things we've learnt from God's word. Parents, do the things you read each day have anything of importance for you to teach your children? Neighbours, have the verses you read this morning got anything in them that you might be able to share with your neighbour? What did you read this morning that you might be able to use to help or encourage someone you come into contact with today? If you got a fresh appreciation of the greatness of being saved, is there someone who isn't a Christian you could share the Gospel with today? If you found some encouragement from the Lord in some difficult circumstance, is there some family member or friend who is suffering that you could encourage today? If the Lord corrected some sin in your life through the Scriptures you read today, might you be able to help someone who is similarly struggling with the passing pleasures of sin?

The psalmist's fourth and final "I have" statement comes in Psalm 119:14. "***I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as much as in all riches.***"

I'd just make the point here that reading the Scriptures is supposed to make us rejoice. That's not the same as saying that we must always be ridiculously happy with cheesy grins on our faces. Our demeanour must always be appropriate for the situation we are in. We sorrow with those who sorrow, rejoice with those who rejoice and so on (see Romans 12:15). But as we read God's word, and as over time and repeated reading we get a greater grasp of God's testimonies, we can rejoice as we see the wisdom of God. That means that even in trying circumstances we are able to rejoice as we read God's word and see that He is sovereign; He is in control of all things, and that ultimately He will do right. As we read God's instructions for how we should live, even those that are unpopular in today's culture, we can rejoice in the wisdom of God as we know that He knows what is good for us. The psalmist so valued God's word that he rejoiced in it as much as all riches. Could we say the same thing?

We've spent some time considering four things that the psalmist had done. He had sought after God with his whole heart (Psalm 119:10), he had hidden God's word in his heart (Psalm 119:11), he had declared God's judgments (Psalm 119:13) and he had rejoiced in God's testimonies (Psalm 119:14). As we move on to the final verses of our section for today, can I ask the question whether we have made similar determinations in our own lives? They are crucial if, like the psalmist, we want to cleanse our way.

I stated earlier on that living according to God's word is an ongoing process. The psalmist had done four good things in the past. Now we finish with four "I will" statements. The psalmist had done well in the past but that was not sufficient. He made fresh determination that day to live according to God's word. What a good desire! Is it yours? Let's read Psalm 119:15-16, "***I will meditate on Your precepts, and [I will] contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word.***"

In many ways these four statements are very similar to the "I have" statements we've already considered together today, so really not much more needs to be said about them, but allow me to leave you with some challenges.

1. Today, will you meditate on God's precepts?
2. As you read God's word:
 - Will you contemplate what it means?
 - Will you find delight in it?
 - Will you remember it?

Of course, all of these questions assume that you spend some time actually reading God's word. Perhaps for some listeners that's not a regular experience. Why not start today? After all, the psalmist tells us it's the way to keep our way clean! (See Psalm 119:9) May you know God's blessing as you take heed according to His word.

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