

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Psalm 119 - The importance of God's Word: Gimel - Psalm 119:17-24

Christian greetings to you all and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are continuing with the series on the importance to us of God's word, based upon Psalm 119. Today's talk, which is the third in the series, covers Psalm 119:17-24 under the sub-title "Gimel", the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet, printed in our translations of the Bible. Most of us will be aware that Psalm 119 contains 176 verses, broken into twenty-two sections with eight verses to each section. In the original Hebrew, each verse in a particular section commences with the same Hebrew letter hence our section, which is the third in the psalm, begins with the letter 'Gimel', which I trust I have pronounced correctly. Obviously this is lost in translation, yet it is retained as a heading to Psalm 119:17-24.

Before examining the individual verses of our portion, I wish to give an overview of Psalm 119:17-24. The psalmist records a measure of complaint when distressing circumstances, especially persecution, crowd into his life. Being a stranger in God's world there is much that puzzles, causing him to bring his anxieties to the Lord in prayer, seeking deliverance along with a deeper insight into God's ways, as revealed in His word. There is a sense of earnest longing for that fullness of life, which is repeated time and again through the whole of the psalm.

After that short introduction, we must turn now to consider the verses which are our portion to study so I shall read Psalm 119:17 using the English Standard Version of the Bible: "*Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word.*"

From this we learn that the psalmist's prayer is for his life to be extended, not for the expected experiences of everyday living, but rather that he might have the privilege of obeying God's word. This immediately challenges each one of us with the question of our expectations from our faith in the Lord Jesus. Some preaching and teaching that I have listened to seems to stop at the moment we have our sins forgiven through faith in the death of Jesus. This seems to me to be a travesty of the full unfolding of the Gospel as we, quite rightly, prize the blessings of the Gospel yet, sadly, do not always grasp what John Piper calls "the best and final gift of God's love, the gift of God's beauty".

One of the chief desires of the psalmist was to live for God and to serve Him. He will observe the teachings of Scripture because in doing so he can serve and know God, demonstrating that the very action of doing so is precious. I have long thought that a preaching that emphasises the blood of the Lord Jesus and stops short of identifying Who Jesus is, as the incarnate Son of God, is only part of the truth. The Lord, in John 14:6, states that He is "*The way*". When we believe in the Lord Jesus, we enter into an experience of what the Lord calls abundant life (see John 10:10), which is superior to anything else. In measure, this is what the psalmist is longing for, though we must not read back the blessings of the Christian and apply them to the inhabitants of the Old Testament world. Their blessings were experienced in the land that God had given to them. The fifth of the Ten Commandments helps us to understand this for it commanded the Israelite to obey and respect parents so that "*...your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you*" (Exodus 20:12).

The next verse of our allocated portion is Psalm 119:18: "*Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.*"

At first sight this prayer seems to be asking for the obvious for, if a person can read, then grasping the meaning of a sentence, or even a single word, is simple. This prayer, however, is for an acknowledgement of treasures in the Word of God, not seen by natural sight or a quick glance. It is a plea for spiritual discernment and divine unveiling accomplished in the psalmist by God Himself. Such a prayer is certainly in line with New Testament teaching, as we can read in 1 Corinthians 2:14: "*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.*"

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Ephesians, enlarges and extends this thought, as we can read in Ephesians 1:18: "*...having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.*"

That the Spirit of God would open the eyes of our understanding, whenever we read His word, should be our constant prayer.

At this point, I am moved to add a further comment upon Psalm 119:18, which is extra-biblical yet still relevant. We could not begin to behold wondrous things from God's Word unless we have learned to read. Universal education is a privilege that began for most English people in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Most of us are aware that the Old Testament scriptures were written in Hebrew and so needed translating into our own language. I wish therefore, to draw attention to the Bible translators who are still active in this task. There are many people who still do not possess the Bible in their own languages, or dialect, and so rely upon others to provide them with portions from it. No longer are these dedicated men and women, who spend their lives translating the Scriptures, in fear of persecution and death, simply because they produce the Scriptures in a different tongue. This has not always been the case, as we can learn from the biography of William Tyndale, who was burned to death for publishing his version of the Holy Bible in English. We owe such men and women a great debt for delivering the Word of God to us in a language we can understand. Consequently, we, who possess the Scriptures have to face the challenge of Psalm 119:18 by searching for those "wondrous things".

Moving on now to Psalm 119:19 which says: *"I am a sojourner upon the earth; hide not your commandments from me!"*

Notice how the writer describes himself as a sojourner or a stranger upon the earth. This ought to be an element in our present-day Christian pathway for as Hebrews 13:14 tells us *"that we have no continuing city, but we seek one that is to come."* Though the pilgrim character of Christianity seems to be missing from many of us, it marked so many of the men and women of faith in the past. When I was young, we used to sing one of Fanny Crosby's hymns which embraces this theme:

*"Whither, pilgrims, are you going,  
Going each with staff in hand?  
We are going on a journey,  
Going at our king's command.  
Over hills and plains and valleys,  
We are going to His palace,  
Going to the better land."*

(Fanny J Crosby 1820-1915)

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Colossians, impresses upon them to set their affections on things above: *"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God"* (Colossians 3:1-3).

Sadly, we find it much easier to be concerned with, and taken up by, things of time to the detriment of our spiritual life and pilgrim character.

For the convenience of time, I will link the last part of Psalm 119:19 with Psalm 119:20: *"...hide not your commandments from me! My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times."*

From this, we get a sense of the earnest desire of the psalmist for the knowledge of God's Word. Time and again throughout Psalm 119 we get expressions of a deep longing to learn more of the ways and knowledge of God, expressed in His Word. Another psalm extends this thought: *"As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God"* (Psalm 42:1).

One of the great privileges, granted to believers, is that we have knowledge of the eternal God while dwelling in mortal flesh. Paul expressed his deep longing for this to be increased, as we read in Philippians 3:8 and 10: *"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and do count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."*

When writing to the Corinthian church, Paul said that we have this knowledge in earthen vessels, (see 2 Corinthians 4:7) in other words in our earthly bodies.

As we move, on can I remind you all that this broadcast is brought to you by *Truth for Today*. Now our next verse is Psalm 119:21: *"You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from your commandments."*

There are two points that I want to take up from Psalm 119:21, both of which occur time and again in Scripture. The first is the warning against insolence which, along with pride, vanity, arrogance, unrighteousness, hypocrisy and

injustice, warrants many warnings throughout the Bible. Pride appears in many guises, such as pride of place, or pride of face or pride of race or even pride of grace, which is when we consider our spiritual knowledge is superior to others in the family of faith. The Lord Jesus warned against such an attitude when He used the comparison between the publican and the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14. The Lord is the example that we should seek to follow as He said in Matthew 11:29: *"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

The second point I wish to make from Psalm 119:21 is the absolute necessity for obedience. In this Psalm 119:21, the psalmist warns against wandering from God's commandments, which we find extremely easy so to do. We might be able to quote whole passages of Scripture by rote, yet, until the word of God affects our attitude and behaviour, we are not well taught Christians. How often has Psalm 119:22 been breathed as a prayer by many persecuted believers: *"Take away from me scorn and contempt, for I have kept your testimonies."*

Many times, during His earthly ministry, the Lord warned His disciples that they would meet opposition and ridicule. Paul in 2 Timothy 3:12 repeated this warning when he wrote *"that all who desire to live godly lives would suffer persecution."* In some countries, that persecution can mean long periods of imprisonment or even death. It is not so serious in our land, though I am sure that we all have had to deal with contempt simply because we believe the Bible and believe that the Lord Jesus rose from the grave.

How do we deal with this mockery? Certainly not with violence, either of word or deed. I repeat that mockery and contempt is what we have been warned against by virtue of living in an unbelieving world. Generally, in the UK, our testimony to the living God, revealed in the Lord Jesus, is met with indifference, but if we do encounter scorn then let our recourse be similar to the psalmist and take the matter to the Lord in prayer. Joseph Scriven (1819-1886) penned some words that have become very well known which might help us:

*"Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?  
Take it to the Lord in prayer:  
In His arms He'll take and shield thee,  
Thou wilt find a solace there."*

Some might say that such words are sentimental and simplistic. I would suggest that they are following the thought of the psalmist in Psalm 119:22.

In Psalm 119:23, we see a comparison between a servant and a prince. I suppose that, all things being equal, then most of us would choose to be a prince, with all the wealth and privilege that comes with such a position. *"Even though princes sit plotting against me, your servant will meditate on your statutes."*

It must be stated immediately that Psalm 119:23 is not claiming that the poor are morally superior to the rich and privileged. The touchstone must be the moral attitude and actions of a person. Here in Psalm 119:23, one was meditating in the law of God, while the other was plotting to bring evil upon him. At the trial of the Lord Jesus, many of the influential and powerful were seeking to bring in a guilty verdict against Him. Time and again, in past years, even in our country, many servants of the Lord Jesus have been prosecuted by the state.

I give three examples of men who were subject to prosecution by the magistrates.

A few minutes ago I mentioned William Tyndale, who suffered at the stake for translating the Scriptures into English. Despite enduring the years of tribulations as a fugitive, he continued with his God inspired task to provide us with the word of God, in words we could understand.

Secondly, we have the example of John Bunyan, who suffered years in jail for simply preaching the Gospel of our Lord Jesus, when the state would not grant him permission.

My third example is a man you have probably never heard of. His name is John Wedgwood, distantly related to Josiah Wedgwood, the famous potter. He, (John), was a preacher with the Primitive Methodists, who was also imprisoned for preaching at Grantham, without permission, in the second decade of the nineteenth century. The writer of the Hebrew epistle was moved to quote many examples of men and women who suffered for their faith (Hebrews 11:30-37). His conclusion was that the world was not worthy of them (Hebrews 10:38).

We must quickly move on, as our allocated time has almost gone. Psalm 119:24 is the last for us to consider, in the portion of Psalm 119 which is covered by the word "Gimel": *"Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counsellors."*

What a wonderful verse to finish our time together! At the same time, it contains a challenge to us as to whether, or not, we consider God's Word a delight. The Lord had a very pertinent comment to those who were listening to Him, which we can read in John 5:39-40: *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."*

In Luke 24:13-49 the resurrected Lord appeared to two of His disciples and *"expounded, in all of the Scriptures, the things concerning Himself"* (see Luke 24:27). My point is that when we read the Bible, it will reveal to us the greatness and majesty of the Person of Christ, along with the wonder and immensity of His victory over death, sin and evil. These things are, or should, be a delight to us as men and women who have been brought to believe in the Lord Jesus.

There is a volume, on the Christian second-hand book market that was written by AM Hodgkin entitled *"Christ in all the Scriptures"*. I think that title sums up the Christian's attitude to the Bible. I find Alexander MacLaren's comments, regarding the *"testimonies of the Lord being a delight"* (Psalm 119:24), well worth bringing to your attention. In his book on the Psalms he writes that Psalm 119:24 heightens the impression of the psalmist's rest. *"Not only the subjects of his meditation, but bringing inward sweetness, though earth is in arms against him"*. How much inward sweetness do we gain by reading the Scriptures?

In addition to the testimonies of the Lord being our delight, they are also our counsellors. Here is a positive thought to end our time together today. Calvin stated that this was a sentence worthy to be weighed by us, when the writer called the commandments of God *"his counsellors"* (Psalm 119:24). All the wisdom and pronouncements of men can be laid aside, when we are immersed in the word of God, and governed by it. I believe it was Dwight Moody, the American evangelist, who said that *"...the Bible would keep him from sin or sin would keep him from the Bible"*. No single statement can be the whole truth, yet there is more than an element of truth in Moody's statement. The psalmist's thought is that when he is governed by the Word, he would be truly wise. If we had time, we could investigate the many ways that the Word, through the power of the Spirit, leads us into a holy life.

To finish our talk I am going to read the verses we have studied today in one continuous passage: *"Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word. 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 119:17-24).

May the Lord's blessing rest upon us all this day. Good morning and thank you for listening.

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