

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Psalm 119 - The importance of God's Word: He - Psalm 119:33-40

Introduction

We continue with our series on Psalm 119, looking at the fifth stanza, Psalm 119:33-40. Each verse in this stanza commences, in the original Hebrew scriptures, with the Hebrew letter 'HE'. This is the fifth letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The meaning of the letter 'HE' is a window, lattice window or an opening. So, we have the thought of looking, beholding, contemplating and giving access to light. This reminds me of Psalm 119:130, *"The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding [or instruction] to the simple [or those who do not know the truth]."* Each verse is a couplet and as we consider each verse we will see how both parts complement each other. Finally, some scholars believe that these eight verses could be considered as a prayer. We will see that this is most appropriate as we briefly study the verses one by one. This Psalm is all about God's law and most of the verses reference the word 'law' or one of its synonyms, such as statutes.

Let us now read the eight verses, Psalm 119:33-40, *"Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart. Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness. Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things and revive me in Your way. Establish Your word to Your servant, who is devoted to fearing You. Turn away my reproach which I dread, for Your judgments are good. Behold, I long for Your precepts; revive me in Your righteousness."*

Psalm 119:33: "Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end."

The opening words, "Teach me...", tell us immediately about the psalmist, the desire of his heart, and the value he places upon God's word. His plea goes directly to God with the expression "O LORD".

"The way of your statutes" is a slightly strange expression, but the psalmist is willing to learn. The statutes will give instruction for the journey of life. So, in the opening words of the stanza we have someone with an open heart, a mind ready to learn and live by God's word.

"And I shall keep it to the end" is the second part of this verse which emphasises the lifelong commitment.

2 Timothy 3:16 states, *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."* In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul is seeking to remind Timothy of the value and importance of all and every scripture. This parallels the longing of the psalmist to be taught by God's word. Paul was acutely aware of the living power of God's word. The *se* verses are a challenge to every Christian to know and live by God's instruction in righteousness.

We have started this stanza with an intense desire and longing to be taught. The recognition that God's word is the only true source of instruction enables a fullness in a committed life.

Psalm 119:34: "Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart."

Psalm 119:34 is a step forward, not only is there a desire to be taught, Psalm 119:33, but the need to understand what is being taught - *"give me understanding"*. Christians are expected to understand the Bible so that it will have the right kind of impact on their lives. We need to prayerfully read the Bible, to understand the scriptures in their context and where it is right to do so, apply its teaching to our lives. Part of Solomon's personal prayer to God was for understanding as stated in 1 Kings 3:9, *"Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil."* No matter how well we are taught, if we do not understand the relevance of the teaching then we will not be able to apply what we have learned. Solomon was able to do this concerning two women who both laid claim to the same child, see 1 Kings 3:16-28. This puts a great burden upon Bible teachers to speak with clarity. With understanding the psalmist was confident that he would *"keep Your law"* (Psalm 119:34). This

reminds me of "Terms and Conditions" attached to many products and services. They are so often lengthy and lacking in clarity that many people simply ignore them. It only becomes an issue when something goes wrong!

In the second part of Psalm 119:34 we see the enthusiasm of the psalmist, *"I shall observe it with my whole heart."* I am reminded of Ezra who had committed himself to be a teacher in Israel. Ezra 7:10 states, *"For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel."* This kind of attitude needs to be the same for every believer. In Nehemiah 8, Ezra read from the law to all the assembled people in Jerusalem. As he read the scriptures, there were others with him who helped the people to understand what was being read, see Nehemiah 8:8. Ezra had help in his mission to teach the people. This must be the same in assemblies and fellowships that more than one person needs to show Christian responsibility for teaching and causing all believers to understand and to grow spiritually.

In Luke 24:13-49 the Lord Jesus helps the two disciples travelling home to Emmaus. It states in Luke 24:45, *"He [the risen Lord] opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures."* The Lord Jesus also spoke about the Holy Spirit that, *"When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth"*, John 16:13.

Psalm 119:35: *"Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, for I delight in it."*

Again, the psalmist is not only prepared to live his life in obedience to the scriptures, but he also appreciates his own weakness. So, he asks for assistance from the only One who can truly give the necessary help - *"make me"*. This life of obedience is the psalmist's delight, his pleasure. There is nothing else in the whole world that comes anywhere near to give real delight and pleasure. I am reminded of the opening words of Psalm 1, *"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law, he meditates day and night"* (Psalm 1:1-2). Do I have such pleasure in being obedient to God's word? This is a very real challenge. Am I in the right spiritual frame of mind? Let us not forget about the word "command". A command is a clear instruction to do something. There are no options and no alternatives. One of the Ten Commandments states, *"You shall not murder"*, Exodus 20:13. The Commandments that apply to our relationships with other people are good principles to live by. Now it is not only in the Old Testament, but also in the New. Romans 13:9-10 state, *"You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not covet, and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law."* Just think what the world would be like if everyone followed this teaching, but unbelievers will not because it is contrary to their unregenerate nature. However, Christians are expected to follow the teaching of Paul in Romans 13:9-10. The Bible is our instruction manual for righteous living.

In 3 John 4, John states, *"I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth."* The teaching of Psalm 119 is very relevant to Christians as it parallels New Testament teaching regarding faithfulness to God's word.

Psalm 119:36: *"Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness."*

This may seem an odd couplet, not like Psalm 119:33-35. However, the LORD speaks about the heart of the natural man, through His servant Jeremiah in Jeremiah 17:9, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"* I am sure that the psalmist was equally aware of the tendency of the heart to stray after wrong things, so he desires that his heart be inclined or lean towards God's word. God's testimonies are those sections that witness to God's holy nature, His purposes, His heart of love and His unswerving righteousness. It is an unwritten requirement that we should be ever mindful of who God is.

We are not to major on God's love at the expense of God's righteousness and holiness. We are to be rightly balanced Christians. Covetousness is associated with desiring anything that is not legitimately mine and is the tenth commandment, *"You shall not covet..."* (Exodus 20:17). Therefore, the psalmist wants both the positive, leaning towards God's word, and to be kept from the negative, covetousness. Covetousness is listed among attributes of the godless in both Mark 7:20-23 and Romans 1:28-32. In Mark the wickedness springs from the heart and in Romans it comes from the mind. We see that the unsaved person is only evil in his ways and God will judge such unless they turn to the Lord Jesus Christ and receive Him truly as their Saviour.

Psalm 119:37: *"Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things and revive me in Your way."*

In life we cannot help but see things that are "worthless". They are not of any spiritual or moral value - things that are negative as far as the Christian lifestyle is concerned. But we can refrain from "looking", a scriptural word which means to have a good look, seeking to observe all the detail! This is a real challenge in a world that seeks to promote wrong values and images. The psalmist wants the 'real' life to be dominant in his life; this is the godly life which has its origin in God. This life has a purpose. It is to keep the godly on the right pathway.

Early believers were known by the term "the Way" or "that Way" (see Acts 9:2, Acts 19:9, Acts 19:23, Acts 24:14, Acts 24:22). The expression not only indicated a journey but the type of journey. This journey had resulted from an encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ, accepting Him as their Saviour and Lord. This experience changed their lives and people could see the change. The psalmist has the same desire; he wanted to live God's way. In Genesis 4:1-5:32 there is the record of a man called Enoch. One of the outstanding features of Enoch is that he walked with God (Genesis 5:22, 24). He was a man who had been revived in God's way.

These words are challenging. Does my life show that I am a Christian? Or does my life blend into the crowd so that I become indistinguishable from the people around me?

Psalm 119:38: "Establish Your word to Your servant, who is devoted to fearing You."

The first part Psalm 119:38 seems to imply that we need to have the word of God firmly fixed in our hearts and minds. In Ephesians 3:17, Paul writes to encourage believers to be "*rooted and grounded in love*". In other words, to gain nourishment from divine love and to have love as a solid foundation on which to build their lives. It is similar in Psalm 119:38. The desire of the psalmist is that God's word be established in his life. Make the word unchangeable and totally reliable. Why does he ask such a thing? Because the psalmist holds God in the highest esteem. God is the Sovereign of the universe. In His hand He holds the life and existence of all creation. There is to be no lightness or frivolity of attitude concerning God. Christians do not use carelessly the name of God or the name of Jesus as unbelievers do. It is so easy to fall into the ways and language of the world. Let us guard our lips and tongue.

Psalm 119:39 "Turn away my reproach which I dread, for Your judgments are good."

There is one single certainty that every true Christian can expect from this godless world and that is ridicule, mockery and reproach. Being faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ will bring such a response from others. There is also another sadness that I have observed that when a believer endeavours to obey God's instruction, fellow believers ridicule and mock because they do not feel the need to obey what God has written.

The other thought that may have been in the mind of the psalmist is his fear of failure. Failure would bring reproach upon the psalmist and it would reflect badly upon his God. Failure and lack of faithfulness is damaging to the testimony and brings dishonour to God.

This is balanced by the psalmist referring to God's judgments because they are good as indeed is the whole of God's word. God's judgments are God's decisions upon persons and/or things that are based upon God's assessment. God's assessment will always be true. Therefore, if God has made a judgment then it is imperative that we as believers abide by that decision. We agree with God even if it runs totally contrary to the current trends of the day.

Psalm 119:40: Behold, I long for Your precepts; revive me in Your righteousness."

The psalmist is making a declaration of a past decision; it has not changed in his heart, but he requires a fresh reviving. A precept is that which is a specific charge for which we are expected to be responsible. In Ephesians 5:25 we have stated that husbands are to love their wives. If I look around in this world I see that this is often regarded a temporary precept; it would have no lasting responsibility or commitment upon me as a husband. If on the other hand I consider God's word, then it is binding upon me while my wife and I are both living. I am expected to love regardless of situations that we may experience in our lives together. From this scriptural illustration I can see that a precept is important. There are many precepts in God's word that apply to me. We can therefore see how the psalmist wants to be re-invigorated in God's righteousness. He wants to live right according to God's principles.

To conclude

At the commencement of this talk I mentioned that some Bible teachers consider this stanza as a prayer. Having gone through verse by verse I think we could consider each as a short prayer. Let us read again the verses of this stanza as we conclude this talk: "*Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law; indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart. Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to covetousness. Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things and revive me in Your way. Establish Your word to Your servant, who is devoted to fearing You. Turn away my reproach which I dread, for Your judgments are good. Behold, I long for Your precepts; revive me in Your righteousness*" (Psalm 119:33-40)

Timothy Dudley-Smith (born 1926) wrote a hymn based on Luke 1:46-55. I think some of his words in this hymn highlight what the psalmist is seeking to convey. I will quote two of the verses of the hymn.

*Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;
Tender to me the promise of His word;
In God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.*

*Tell out, my soul, the glories of His word!
Firm is His promise, and His mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
To children's children and for evermore!*

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Please note that one Hebrew word may be translated by more than one English word. Remember the Hebrew letter 'HE' has the meaning of a window or an opening. Therefore, we can see how these verses speak of letting God's word have an entrance into our hearts and minds, "*the entrance of Your words gives light*", Psalm 119:130. We can be challenged as to how much of God's word are we allowing into our lives?7

A chorus that was taught to young children in Sunday School was simple but highly instructive. The words were as follows.

*Read your Bible, read your Bible,
Read it daily, read it daily,
It's a lamp, it's a lamp,
And a light to your pathway.*

What was good instruction for young children is still an important message for people of every age. Read it, do it daily, it illuminates the soul and makes clear the path we must walk in this world for God's glory.

Thank you for listening. May the Lord bless and encourage you today.

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