

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Psalm 119 - The importance of God's Word: Lamed - Psalm 119:89-96

We are continuing our series on Psalm 119, "The importance of God's Word". In the original Hebrew Scriptures, each verse of the stanza, Psalm 119:89-96, except Psalm 119:90, commences with the Hebrew letter "Lamed" which means "ox-goad".

### Introduction to Psalm 119:89-96

In the hand of a farmer ploughing or a cart driver, the ox-goad would be used to start and keep the oxen going forward, ensure they keep moving in the right direction and maybe even encouraged to quicken their pace. Over the years, I have often been reminded that in Christian development there is never the thought of standing still or going backwards as this would result in spiritual stagnation. Christianity is always connected with progress, growing and spiritual development.

In Paul's letter to the Philippian church, Philippians 3:14 he states, *"I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*

Let us look at each verse of Psalm 119:89-96 in detail.

### Psalm 119:89, *"Forever, O LORD, your word is settled in heaven"*

This short verse brings to our attention some important issues. First, the word *"forever"* indicating to us that the Lord's "Word" is eternal and established in heaven. The "Word" is communicated to us by God's servants as inspired by the Holy Spirit. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 state: *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."* The 'Word' is permanent and not subject to change. So, the "Word" is dependable; we can always rely upon its teaching. The "Word" equips for godly service and provides daily guidance. Finally, we should emphasise that it is the Lord's "Word", preserved for us in the Bible. The "Word" is not a "pick and mix" of our own choosing. If the "Word" does not fit with the standards of the world, then the only conclusion for a Christian is the "Word" is right and the world has got it wrong!

### Psalm 119:90 *"Your faithfulness endures to all generations; You established the earth, and it abides"*

In Psalm 119 there are three verses that break the general rule that in each verse of the psalm there is a mention of the word law or one of its synonyms. The three verses are Psalm 119:90, Psalm 119:122 and Psalm 119:132. In relation to Psalm 119:90 we need to ask, why?

A possible answer to this may be the continuing theme from Psalm 119:89-91. The first part of Psalm 119:90 directs our attention back to God, *"Your faithfulness endures to all generations."* In many ways God is faithful - faithful to those who believe. From Adam onwards, one generation to the next, God's faithfulness can be traced as we read through the Bible. Where there is failure, it is on our side, but God remains faithful and constant throughout. God does not change and neither does His "Word". The second part of Psalm 119:90 brings to our attention God's wonderful creation, *"You established the earth, and it abides."* We are taken right back to the beginning of time: Genesis 1-2.

As we read the book of Genesis, we know that problems and difficulties occurred. Disobedience and sin arrived with a devastating impact and had dramatic consequences (see Genesis 3:1-24). The perfection of creation became damaged and the once ideal environment changed to a disastrous situation. The flood (See Genesis 6:1-9:17) was the next major disaster for mankind as God judged the evil of people with only eight persons being preserved (see 1 Peter 3:20). But through it all, the basic work of creation remained, the established earth abides, it endures, it continues. This is the major point of God's faithfulness to all generations.

The words of Thomas O Chisholm's (1866-1960) hymn are most appropriate:

1. *Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not,  
As Thou hast been Thou for ever wilt be.*

*Chorus:*

*Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness;  
Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided -  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

2. *Summer and winter, and spring-time and harvest,  
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,  
Join with all nature in manifold witness  
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.*

3. *Pardon for sin, and a peace that endureth,  
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,  
Blessings all mine with ten thousand beside!*

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**Psalm 119:91, “*They continue this day according to Your ordinances, for all are Your servants*”**

The psalmist states that God's "Word" and creation continue right up to this day. It is not just to the psalmist's day but to our day and they will continue because the "Word" is settled in heaven and the decision about creation is in the hand of God. Genesis 8:22 states, "*While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease.*" Still today these basic conditions of creation remain in the calendar of each year.

God's 'Word' reveals all that we need to know about divine Persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This is what we have in the Bible, God's revealed "Word". God's 'Word' is unlike the words of mankind which cannot reach into the soul and bring people to a saving faith in Christ, the Son of God.

Creation is the platform in which God has displayed His wonderful love and grace to the whole of mankind. From the amazing expanse of the universe as seen on a clear starry night to the microscopic detail within a single cell. Most amazing of all is the tremendous event of the incarnation of the Son of God.

All has been divinely decided according to God's ordinances or judgments. What has been established cannot change. The latest concern that the environmentalists have is the damage being caused to the planet by plastic waste. The wonder product of decades ago is now a monster damaging the environment. Plastic is not bio-degradable it simply breaks up into smaller and smaller pieces. In recent times we have seen rivers choked with plastic rubbish, beaches totally covered with plastic and vast floating islands of plastic in the world's oceans. Mankind seems to have an aptitude to be destructive!

**Psalm 119:92, “*Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction*”**

When the psalmist uses the word "Law" he is considering the whole of God's word. God's word is there to teach, to give daily guidance and to direct our attention towards right things. God's word is an anchor or foundation stone on which to build our lives. This verse shows the psalmist delighting in the law; he finds joy in reading and, no doubt, meditating on God's word. We must challenge ourselves as to whether we find delight in reading the Bible.

We are not told specifically about the affliction that the psalmist was going through. The word in the Hebrew is associated with poverty, misery and even depression. It would seem to be life threatening as he talks about perishing, even to losing his life. Let us not miss the "life saving" connection. The word of God is much undervalued in the world today. God's word provides the balance and solutions to life's problems.

**Psalm 119:93, “*I will never forget Your precepts, for by them You have given me life*”**

Psalm 119:93 supports and emphasises what we have said in connection with Psalm 119:92. The psalmist makes a binding promise to his God, "*I will never forget Your precepts.*" It is good to make a commitment to God's word. Read God's word daily and memorise what you can. Daily reading God's word is important for every Christian. It is the daily

spiritual manna that has its origin in heaven. A precept is that which is a specific charge for which we are expected to be responsible. God gave the Israelites ten commandments (See Exodus 20:1-17). Each commandment was a specific charge for them to obey. The Israelites had asked God to give them commandments but what they discovered was the impossibility to keep them. However, that was no reason not to commit to live by them to the best of their ability. It was this kind of life God desired from His earthly people.

What was missing in every Israelite was the power to live fully by God's word. It is so different in the Christian age. The indwelling Holy Spirit in every believer gives the ability to live a godly life - to refuse the wrong and to do the right. As Paul found, he had two conflicting natures. Romans 7:24-25 highlight the problem. Romans 7:24 states, "*O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*" Paul concludes that the natural man has not the power to do what is right for God. But the remedy in Romans 7:25 states, "*I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.*" The realisation that two principles were at work is a major step forward which every Christian needs to understand. We are not left at this point; Romans 8:1-4 complete the teaching on how to live a victorious life.

Romans 8:1 gives the principle that is true for every person who has trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord, "*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.*" Sins are forgiven, and the judgment due to us has been taken by Jesus on the cross. We are now in a place of blessing.

Romans 8:2-4 teach how a believer can now live a victorious Spirit filled and controlled life: "*For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*"

This power of the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Christians today was not true of the godly Israelite of old. The Holy Spirit came upon godly Israelites, but it was not permanent as it is with Christians. As King David of old said in Psalm 51:11, "*Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.*" This cannot happen to a true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### **Psalm 119:94, "*I am Yours, save me; for I have sought Your precepts*"**

This continues the same thoughts as Psalm 119:92-93. The psalmist is obviously concerned about the situation that was threatening to engulf him. In Psalm 119:92 he was in danger of perishing or dying, whereas in Psalm 119:93 he was looking for life. Once again in Psalm 119:94 there is the cry, "*save me.*" In many respects this person is desperate. Instead of looking around for someone or something to help, he remains firm as to God's word. Again, he states that he is seeking "*Your precepts.*" There is a plea to God; he reminds God of his faithfulness to God's word. Because he is living a godly life, then this is the basis for God to intervene and bring about deliverance.

We might think that God is either deaf to the psalmist's entreaties or uncaring as to the situation of one of His own children. Both thoughts are untrue. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians has this wonderful verse, 1 Corinthians 10:13, "*No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.*"

We are likely to face many temptations or trials as we go through life. Just because we belong eternally to God does not guarantee a life free from difficulty. Some difficulties may be of our own making and others may come upon us from external situations. The challenge is, "How do we respond to the trials?" 1 Corinthians 10:13 showed the boundaries and limits. My son took his two children camping when they were younger and not always in the best of weather. He felt that this was one of the ways to develop character – "character forming" he would say. He was probably following his parents who also went camping with their three children!

In Psalm 119:92-94 we have noticed how the psalmist refers to the law and specifically to precepts in the law. This was the bedrock on which the psalmist stood. He is not going to move away from this secure place; it was his stronghold. There is a similar theme in Psalm 61:2, "*From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.*" The teaching in God's word is not theoretical but is very practical, meeting the circumstances of daily life, developing godly character.

#### **Psalm 119:95, "*The wicked wait for me to destroy me, but I will consider Your testimonies*"**

In Psalm 119:95 we now move from the generalisation of the "afflictions" that the psalmist spoke of in Psalm 119:92 to the identification of persons, the wicked. It is these persons who are greatly disturbing the psalmist. We are not told what it is about, but in every age the wicked or ungodly do not need a reason to persecute believers. Just after sin

came into the world through Adam's failure and disobedience (see Genesis 2:17-3:7), we find Cain murdering his brother Abel and lying to God about the whole affair. The event is documented in Genesis 4:1-15. Abel had not wronged Cain, but Cain was angry with God and took out his anger on his own brother, Abel.

Notice the language of Psalm 119:95, "*The wicked wait for me to destroy me.*" They were looking for an occasion, probably when there were no witnesses, so that they could carry out their evil intentions. In the above situation of Cain and Abel, Cain probably thought no one had seen his evil crime but God had observed the whole event. Non-Christians think that wrongs can be hidden but God always sees and even knows the motives. Also, God has His day of reckoning when all things will be judged according to His divine standard. The psalmist knows that God understands and sees all, that everything is written down in God's records.

The Scriptures are full of information about the nature of God: 1 John 4 states that "*God is love*" in 1 John 4:8 and 1 John 4:16. Psalm 99:9 states, "*For the LORD our God is holy.*" Daniel 9:14 states, "*For the Lord our God is righteous.*" We might think these attributes are conflicting but not with God. God's nature of love is seen in the Lord Jesus Christ, His atoning death and resurrection to the throne of grace in heaven. God's holiness means that He cannot be associated with sin and allow it and sinners to escape justice even to the point of eternal punishment in the lake of fire.

Then God's righteousness enables Him to bring into blessing those who trust Christ as Saviour to have their sins forgiven and to condemn those who refuse or ignore God's offer of mercy.

The psalmist knows his God and understands the testimonies found in the Scriptures and therefore places his confidence in what he knows, as the end of Psalm 119:95 states, "*but I will consider Your testimonies*". How do we gain such confidence or assurance? The answer has been given in Psalm 119:9, "*By taking heed according to Your word.*"

**Psalm 119:96, "*I have seen the consummation of all perfection, but Your commandment is exceedingly broad*"**

Psalm 119:96 at first sight seems a little difficult but I think it is a contrast. The psalmist observes the world in which he lives and sees that any perfection that might seemingly have been achieved has its end or limit. In Young's Literal Translation of the Scriptures, he rephrases the first part of Psalm 119:96 as, "*Of all perfection I have seen an end*", making Psalm 119:96 easier to understand. Whereas "*Your commandment is exceedingly broad*" indicates that the Scriptures have a quality to them which cannot be exhausted regardless of how much study is undertaken.

It is God's intention that Christians grow in spiritual maturity. Paul in Philippians 3:10 states, "*That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.*" Reading further in Philippians 3 we find Paul was always striving forward to gain a better appreciation of Christ (see Philippians 3:12-15). Philippians 1:21 states, "*For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain*". Striving or moving forward in faith seems to be Paul's motivation in his Christian service. What he desired for himself he undoubtedly desired for fellow believers.

### **To conclude**

Psalm 119:89-96 have focused our attention on the Hebrew letter "Lamed", meaning ox-goad.

We have seen that God's Word is firmly established and continues unchanging, see Psalm 119:89-91. In Psalm 119:92-95 we have the repeated preserving and life-giving quality of God's Word brought before us.

Finally, in Psalm 119:96 we have indicated the inexhaustible quality of the Scriptures. This reminds me of the river that flows out from the House of God in Ezekiel 47. As Ezekiel walked into the river he found waters to swim in and it was so broad that it could not be crossed (see Ezekiel 47:5). As the ox-goad encourages and guides the oxen forward may God's Word motivate us to move forward to grow spiritually.

Thank you for listening to *Truth for Today*, on Psalm 119:89-96, "Lamed", talk number 1069. May the Lord bless and encourage you in your Christian life.

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