

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Psalm 119 - The importance of God's Word: Mem - Psalm 119:97-104

Introduction

Over 40 years ago I read a library book which claimed that many common over the counter medicines and beauty treatments are totally ineffective. The one that seems to have stuck in my mind is anti-dandruff shampoo - don't ask me why! Before the makers of Head and Shoulders issue any lawsuits, I would like to point out that I am simply passing on the writer's statements: I have no evidence to offer either way! The author claimed that while the chemicals in most anti-dandruff shampoos may have some benefit, they will never work if you simply apply the shampoo and then wash it back off again, as they recommend on the label. They can only work, he claimed, if you leave them on your hair much longer than anybody normally does.

Before you start wondering why I am offering unsolicited beauty treatment advice of questionable scientific value, let me get to the point! Our way of handling God's word can often suffer from the same problem this long-forgotten author was describing. We read it, apply it very briefly to our minds, and then it is "rinsed away" by our busy lives before it has any chance to achieve its intended purpose! Not so with the writer of Psalm 119, as you will notice if you pay attention while I read the eight verses, Psalm 119:97-104, which provide our text for today.

"Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Your precepts. I have restrained my feet from every evil way, that I may keep your word. I have not departed from Your judgments, for You Yourself have taught me. How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way", Psalm 119:97-104.

I make this the sixth out of seven times that the writer uses the words "meditate" or "meditation" in this psalm. It was plainly important to him. In the first verse of our section he links the meditation with his love of God's word, *"Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day"* (Psalm 119:97). The reason that he meditates on God's word is because he loves it. He runs it over and over again in his mind, like the words of a letter from a well-loved friend. For some of us the word meditation conjures up images of eastern mystics emptying their minds by focussing on something repetitive and mundane, but the Bible meaning is about **filling** our minds with something valuable and beautiful. By definition, it takes time, which is one of the scarcest resources in many of our lives. But it isn't just a question of finding a few more minutes to add to our daily Bible reading time. The psalmist talks about *"all the day."* I don't think he meant he just sat around for a whole day quietly contemplating a passage of scripture. I assume that as he went through his day, whenever his tasks allowed him a few minutes to think things over, he went back to considering God's word. I'm sure it had become a habit for him. The whole of this long psalm gives us evidence of the impact it had on his life, and God's word is **meant** to have a significant impact on us.

Ezra gives us a perfect example of how we ought to approach the Bible: *"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",* Ezra 7:10. There are four stages outlined in this verse and they come in a certain order.

1. Ezra prepared his heart;
2. Ezra prepared to seek the law;
3. Ezra sought the law to do it; and
4. Ezra taught.

1. Ezra prepared his heart

There was some desire to understand God's law, but a realisation that it wouldn't just happen automatically. Ezra wanted to be ready to meet with God, not through some complex ritual, but by setting aside some time and settling his mind ready for the task.

2. Ezra prepared to seek the law

Seek, suggests some effort and application. He wanted to increase his familiarity with what the word of God said. After all, the only way to get to know God is to see what He has revealed about Himself, and by far the best way to do that is to read His word. You might describe this as the building up of knowledge, and a store of information about God, His character and His instructions.

3. Ezra sought the law to do it

This is very much true of the person who wrote Psalm 119. Two things are abundantly clear throughout this Psalm.

- i. That the writer doesn't just **know** God's law, he **does** it; and
- ii. The writer values God's law, not for its own sake, but because it brings him close to the God he loves.

James is very straightforward about the vast chasm between those who just read God's word, and those who also do it! *"If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does"*, James 1:23-25. We are back to the illustration of the anti-dandruff shampoo again! Just hearing has the most transient of impacts on us, and we forget immediately. Continuing, which is related to meditating, and doing, are the transformational activities; they make the real difference in our lives and produce the blessing. This takes us beyond knowledge, into wisdom. Wise people don't just know what the Bible says - although they must have that as a minimum - they also know how it applies to their everyday life.

4. Ezra taught

When he had learned how to apply the word of God to his own life, he was ready to teach it to other people. As I said a few moments ago, these four things have a proper order. We obviously can't **teach** before we **know**, but we should never presume to teach before we **do** either. Not that a teacher must be faultless, but seeking to instruct others in something you are not prepared to do yourself is a very dangerous position to take. Ezra is described, in the book that carries his name, as a "scribe". That means that he was well enough instructed in the Bible to be able to teach and explain it to other people.

At the time that Ezra was written, the title of scribe was a very honourable one. By the time we reach the gospels, the title has become much less positive. The gospel writers often group together, "scribes and Pharisees", and have some very harsh things to say about them. This is what Jesus has to say about the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:2-7. *"The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.'"*

The word "Rabbi" means teacher. The scribes in Jesus' day wanted to be teachers of the law, but they had very little desire to apply it properly to their own lives! I sometimes like to wind up my friends who are members of the teaching profession by quoting the expression, "Those that can do. Those that can't teach." It may be a little unfair to teachers, but it describes the scribes to a T! They could not, or rather would not, do what the Law said, but they loved to instruct **others** in it.

Ezra and the writer of Psalm 119 had very different characteristics. Which begs the question, how can you increase learning and knowledge in ways that don't make you a scribe or a Pharisee? The simple answer is, be careful about why you want more knowledge and what you do with it. Knowledge, even knowledge of God's perfect word, that is acquired simply to make you look clever and win arguments, will, slowly but surely, produce the kind of pride and arrogance that the scribes displayed. Never bothering to pause periodically, and check if what you do and say, matches up with what you have learned will carry you another step along that pathway. Being much faster to point the finger at other people's failures to carry out what the Bible says, than to confess your own lack of obedience, will demonstrate that you are well on track to become one of those people Jesus condemned so vigorously!

In the same way that the medical professionals tell us that we should regularly check our bodies for early warning signs of certain illnesses; we all need to give ourselves a careful spiritual self-examination once in a while! I wonder if we will find evidence of the kind of good-health which Ezra, and the writer of Psalm 119, exhibited, or whether we will some of the tell-tale early warning signs of early onset Phariseeism!

The psalmist makes three striking statements about himself in Psalm 119:98-100:

1. *You ... make me wiser than my enemies* (Psalm 119:98);
2. *I have more understanding than all my teachers* (Psalm 119:99); and
3. *I understand more than the ancients* (Psalm 119:100).

1. ***"You ... make me wiser than my enemies" (Psalm 119:98)***

First, we should notice where this wisdom comes from. It is God that makes the writer wiser than his enemies, not his own abilities or achievements. The New Testament clearly sets out two kinds of wisdom. 1 Corinthians 1 calls them the *"wisdom of this world"* (1 Corinthians 1:20) and the *"wisdom of God"* (1 Corinthians 1:21). James 3 describes a wisdom that is *"earthly, sensual [and] demonic"* (James 3:15) and contrasts it with a *"wisdom that is from above"* (James 3:17).

No doubt the psalmist's enemies had some of the first kind of wisdom and would use it to against him constantly. But if he was made wiser by God, this could only be the wisdom of God, which James describes as, *"...first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy"* (James 3:17). At first glance, these seem like pretty feeble weapons to meet enemies with! But they compose the wisdom of God, represent the character of God and carry the power of God; and **that** power is frequently exhibited in ways that are rather surprising to human beings!

2. ***"I have more understanding than all my teachers" (Psalm 119:99)***

How can you know more than the person who teaches you? It seems counter-intuitive; we ought to be able to have, at the very best, equal understanding to those who instruct us. But when you stop to think about it, if this is not possible, how can progress or revival ever happen? If we were limited to never exceeding our teachers, then knowledge could only ever get less over time. That certainly isn't true in the realms of science and technology, and I don't believe that it should be the case in spiritual things either. Things do often decline, but God can send renewal and revival, and we should always want the next generation of believers to surpass us in their knowledge of God and their obedience to His word. I believe there is such a thing as healthy spiritual ambition, both for others and for ourselves. We should never be content to drift along with no desire for growth or progress. Having more understanding than his teachers is linked to meditation, it is said to be because, *"Your testimonies are my meditation"* (Psalm 119:99). The writer didn't just learn some facts from his teachers, he meditated on the things he learned about God, and this caused him to grow.

3. ***"I understand more than the ancients" (Psalm 119:100)***

This is perhaps the most startling claim of the three. Our culture values youth over age, and we are inclined to think of things, and people, declining in value as they get older. The culture in Biblical times was quite different. The old, and things of the past, were highly prized. People looked back to David as the greatest of the kings and Moses as the greatest of the prophets, and the ancients were the great store of wisdom. To understand more than the ancients is a claim of a very high order! However, it was understood that age does not automatically produce wisdom. Job 32:9 states, *"Great men are not always wise, nor do the aged always understand justice."*

Put simply, age creates the opportunity to become wise, but it doesn't provide a guarantee that it will happen. The more years you have lived, the more opportunities you have had to learn and grow wiser, but not everybody takes those opportunities. We don't know how old the writer of Psalm 119 was, but he had evidently used his time well! The second clause gives us the reason for this high level of understanding, *"Because I keep your precepts"* (Psalm 119:100). And, once again, the point is reinforced that progress in understanding God's word is built on obeying what we already know.

The word seeps into our minds through reading and meditation. Then it shapes our thoughts and attitudes; which, in turn, form our behaviours and produce self-control. It is this self-control that is the focus of Psalm 119:101, *"I have restrained my feet from every evil way, that I may keep your word."* Let's face it, we are all tempted to do what is wrong, and we will quickly succumb to those temptations unless we exercise a healthy self-restraint. Our sinful nature produces wrong-doing without us needing to be very active in the matter. We sin almost automatically. So, if we are to keep God's word, we will need to keep that sinful nature in check.

The wisdom that God gives to those who meditate on His word, enables us to restrain our minds from dwelling on wrong thoughts. This will allow us to stop our lips saying wrong things, which, in turn, will prevent our feet from walking in wrong paths.

Psalm 119:102 reminds us who our ultimate Teacher is, and where our real strength comes from, *"I have not departed*

from Your judgments, for You Yourself have taught me." The reason the psalmist has been able to keep God's commandments is because of the understanding and wisdom that God Himself has taught him. We have noticed in other sections of this psalm, that the writer is not claiming sinless perfection for himself. It is clear that there have been times when he has gone astray, and had to seek God's forgiveness and restoration. What he means here is that any faithfulness he has shown in keeping God's word, has been the result of God's instruction and power.

Today's section, Psalm 119:97-104, opened with the words, "*Oh, how I love Your law!*" (Psalm 119:97). Now we hear the psalmist say, "*How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*" (Psalm 119:103). You don't get the impression of a man who slogged his way dutifully through a daily Bible reading, all the time longing for something a bit less dreary! He evidently delighted in God's word and derived genuine pleasure from it. The reference to honey reminds me of the time when King Saul's son, Jonathan, was involved in a long battle, and feeling weary. 1 Samuel 14:27 tells us, "*But Jonathan ... stretched out the end of the rod that was in his hand and dipped it in a honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his countenance brightened.*"

The honey seemed to incorporate:

1. Sweetness
2. Refreshing and
3. Strength

1. Sweetness

Honey is known for its sweetness. There are some foods that your mother had to instruct you to eat, "because it is good for you!" Honey is not one of those! You don't hold your nose to get it down, like a foul-tasting medicine. You eat honey to enjoy its delicious sweetness. The psalmist states that God's word tastes even sweeter to him than honey (Psalm 119:103). Of course, a diet of honey alone would not be very healthy! Sometimes, God's word comes to us with a bitter taste, when it challenges our idleness or exposes our sins. The point is, that it can bring joy and delight when we value it properly.

2. Refreshing

The honey brightened Jonathan's countenance, that is it refreshed him. Wearing from the battle and its exertions, a little honey lifted his spirits wonderfully. So can the word of God refresh us when life is proving a battle, or a weariness.

3. Strength

Jonathan goes on to make the point that if all the rest of the army had taken suitable nourishment, the victory might have been much greater. Food provides strength for the task at hand. We can't expect to be very productive in the work God has given us to do, if we are not regularly feeding on the word He has provided to strengthen us.

The last verse of today's section, Psalm 119:97-104, reads, "*Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way*" (Psalm 119:104). We are still engaged with one of this section's main themes, that of understanding. Now we find that the understanding which comes from God's word, enables us to distinguish right ways from false ways, and to shun the false ones. You might be reminded of Proverbs 14:12, "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.*" The human wisdom which we were discussing earlier may conclude that a certain way is right and profitable, but the wisdom of God discerns that it will end in death. Hating such a false way is very sensible and appropriate.

The Hebrew letter that every verse in this section, Psalm 119:97-104) starts with is called Mem, and it carries the meaning of water. Water is a well-known picture of God's word. We think of verses like Ephesians 5:25-26, "*Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word.*" Am I being regularly cleaned up by the careful application of God's word? In John 4:13-14 we hear Jesus saying, "*Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst.*" And again, in John 7:37, "*If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.*" Are we drinking regularly from the clean water supply that is the Bible?

Let me finish with the words of a very simple hymn by R Hudson Pope. They can serve as a suitable prayer in response to what we have been talking about this morning:

*Make the book live to me O Lord,
Show me Thyself within Thy word.
Show me myself, and show me my Saviour,
And make the book live to me.*

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Thank you for listening to this *Truth for Today* talk on Psalm 119, The Importance of God's Word, Psalm 119:97-104, Mem, talk number T1091.

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