

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Psalm 119: The importance of God's word verses 129 – 136; Peh

'It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known,' Charles Dickens, *A tale of two cities*.

'I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm: to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field,' Elizabeth 1, Tilbury speech.

'You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: Victory. Victory at all costs—Victory in spite of all terror—Victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no survival. I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat,' Winston Churchill, House of Commons 1940.

Words matter. These three quotes show how stirring the use of language can be. They show us the power that lies behind our words. Last week we continued looking at Psalm 119, and this morning we shall think about verses 129 – 136. Let us begin by reading them together:

"Your testimonies are wonderful; Therefore my soul keeps them.
The entrance of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple.
I opened my mouth and panted, For I longed for Your commandments.
Look upon me and be merciful to me, As Your custom *is* toward those who love Your name.
Direct my steps by Your word, And let no iniquity have dominion over me.
Redeem me from the oppression of man, That I may keep Your precepts.
Make Your face shine upon Your servant, And teach me Your statutes.
Rivers of water run down from my eyes, Because men do not keep Your law."

The whole of Psalm 119 speaks about the Psalmist's delight in the word of God. This section is no different, although each verse has a slightly different emphasis. Perhaps though, before we consider what the verses say we do need to ask ourselves the question: 'What value do I put on the Bible, the inspired word of God?' I don't know if you have ever watched a quiz programme on T.V. The contestants may be really clever and know a lot about all sorts of things but whenever there is a question on Bible knowledge, even the simple things prove beyond the knowledge of most contestants. The level of Bible knowledge in society today is shockingly bad and this is having catastrophic consequences. If we do not appreciate that humanity is unique, created in God's image, then we can hardly be surprised when we do not treat one another in the way that God expects us to. It is only in the Bible that we can find out why we are unique and have worth. Now you might say that the Bible is a really important book – that is good. I might say that I love my wife, but if I am never at home, and ignore her needs and aspirations then you might rightly question the quality of my love and the truthfulness of my words! So let me ask you again: 'What value do you put upon the word of God?' It ought to form the basis of every aspect of our lives. Normal Christianity

is entirely based upon daily Bible study – that is one of the reasons why, after each broadcast, we offer a free Bible Study course to our audience. It is abnormal and wrong to claim to be a Christian and not to want to let God's word have control over every aspect of life. We can only do this by reading it and understanding what it has to say.

The Psalmist begins his meditation in this section with the words, "Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them." What a great start! The Psalmist has already told us that God's word is wonderful in verse 18, and now he repeats that thought, just in case we missed it first time round! It is also the same word that Isaiah uses to describe the person of the Lord Jesus in Isaiah chapter 9:6: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name shall be called Wonderful." In God's eyes, there is no difference between the written word of God and the second person of the Godhead, the living Word of God. John reinforces this theme in the introduction to his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.....and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (vv1,14). It is absolutely vital that I have this clearly in my mind. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever," and so the Bible is unchangeable (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus Christ showed us what God the Father is like and so does the Bible. Jesus Christ was perfect and so is the Bible. Jesus Christ came that we might have life and the Bible is full of life giving words. The two stand or fall together, but what we cannot do is claim to love Jesus but think that the Bible is out of date or bits of it do not have something to say to us anymore. No wonder the Psalmist could then say: "therefore my soul keeps them." If Jesus was physically in the room with me, I would never dream of telling a lie to you in His hearing. If He was in the car then I would not want Him to hear me fume at other road users. So why do I treat the Bible, and therefore Him, with such disrespect?

In the next verse the Psalmist tells us: "The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple." Generally, houses at that time had only one door and no windows. So other than lighting a lamp, the only way that light could enter a home was through the door. The Psalmist is telling us that the Bible is the door through which the light of God can shine into the house of our lives. Of course, if the door was kept shut then the inside of the house would have no natural light. So Jesus would say, in Revelation 3:20 "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him." Our lives need to be wide open to the Bible and all that it has to teach us so that we can fully enjoy the warmth and light of the presence of God. This is not a mystical experience. It is something that is achieved through the regular and systematic study of the Bible. Only as I allow His word to dictate my actions in every aspect of my life can I experience the light of God. Perhaps, using this picture, you will see what happens when we only allow God into a small part of our lives. We may serve Him on Sunday, but feel that is sufficient; after all, we don't want to be a fanatic! But that is like only opening the door ajar. No sane person would want to live in the gloomy cold, when the full light and warmth of the sun was available!

The effect of living in the light of God routinely is that it gives understanding. I do not want to say that there may never be perplexing and difficult days for saints of God who daily expose their lives to the light of God's word. However, I do need to question myself as to whether the reason so often I don't really understand what God is doing or why He has allowed such and such to happen is because His light had not brought understanding. Now this can not be a fault of God so it must be because I have not opened the door wide to Him. Perhaps next time I find myself questioning God, I need carefully to look and see whether I have become lazy in my Bible study!

Next the Psalmist tells us: "I opened my mouth and panted, for I longed for Your commandments." This verse really speaks about our attitude to God's word. Perhaps you may already have made a connection to Psalm 42:1 "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God." This world is a spiritually dry place and as we go to work and as we spend our leisure time

we are going to become spiritually dry too. Time spent in His word and in His company is like water to a thirsty animal, without which it would soon die. Perhaps, the metaphor is of an animal pursued by ferocious predators to the point of exhaustion, panting in great gulps of oxygen to strengthen muscles required for safety. Or perhaps the metaphor is of a newborn baby yelling because it is hungry, desperate for its next meal. So Peter could write: "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2). I can remember when our children were small giving a good yell and going bright red in the face but as soon as the milk arrived all was well! What a challenge to me as to how much I really desire His word. That child was not going to be distracted or put off until it was fed.

Too often, I am too tired to study, or I don't feel like it, or I am too busy. So many excuses not to feed myself with His word and none of them will do me any good. If we are serious about wanting to grow in our Christian lives and so become more like the Lord Jesus, and this should be our natural desire, then we need to feed on His word. There are no short cuts to growth. There is a divine feast waiting for me between the covers of my Bible. However, it will do me no good whatsoever whilst it stays there! I need to read His word and study it with all the intellect that God has given me. I then need to apply it to my life and refresh my often faulty memory so that it is constantly on my mind. Perhaps then, this confusing life will start to make a whole lot more sense as I learn to view things with my Father's eyes.

Then the Psalmist continues: "Look upon me and be merciful to me, as Your custom is toward those who love Your name." The Psalmist's heartfelt plea is that God would look at Him in mercy. The Hebrew word for *look* is translated as *turn* in other places. I think that the Psalmist has in mind that he knows he is a sinful man and that God finds his sin abhorrent. Yet he longs that God will turn towards him and restore him. I think we have a lovely example of this in the life of the Lord Jesus Himself. In Luke's Gospel, chapter 22, verses 61 - 62, after Peter had three times denied the Lord Jesus, we read: "And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord.....so Peter went out and wept bitterly." In the Psalmist's mind there would be nothing worse than God turning away from him permanently with no hope for the future. For Peter this must have been an excruciating look, one that shook him to the very core. Yet it was also the look that started his restoration – full of mercy and pity. It is at times when we realise that we have failed God that we most need to get back into His presence. We might feel that we do not belong there or that we have sinned too much to be forgiven. The devil will do his utmost to keep us away from God. We, like the Psalmist and like Peter, need that look of the Lord Jesus. It is a look that acknowledges who we are and what we have done, but that will also lead us to realise that we are frankly forgiven. I remember listening to the parents of a suicide bomber saying that they cannot even look at a picture of their son now – it is just too painful. Oh, the wonderful mercy of God that He always looks upon us and wants to restore us to a full and close relationship with Him.

If in the previous two verses we have thought about the Psalmist's attitude and plea, in this next verse we see his walk: "Direct my steps by Your word, and let no iniquity have dominion over me." We have seen already that, in one sense, it is good to be like a baby with a powerful desire for the milk of the word. However, this verse goes on to show that spiritual growth is expected in the life of the Christian. **Direct** or **order** my steps speaks about them having a purpose. We are not to be spiritual toddlers spending as much time on our backside as we do on our feet. Nor are we to stagger about unsure as to whether our legs will keep us up, like a drunkard. Our spiritual walk, our manner of life, is to be purposeful and divinely directed. There is a goal to be reached and each step that we take, each action that we make, should be in a straight line towards that goal. Like a snare, sin lurks waiting to trip us up and hinder our spiritual walk. How very much we need His word to protect us!

Paul in writing to the Christians in Ephesus describes the Bible as the sword of the Spirit. There is no greater defence for the believer than allowing the Holy Spirit to take what we have read in our

daily quiet time and bring it to mind throughout the day. Here we see the wonderful partnership that we have in God's work. It is our responsibility to fill our minds with His word. It is His responsibility to actively apply that to every situation we face and to produce Christ honouring behaviour in our lives. Can we imagine soldiers going into battle only to realise they have forgotten to bring their weapons with them? How foolish an oversight. And yet, how many times do we try to go through a day without equipping ourselves with the Spirit's sword – the Bible? The believer who walks closely to the Lord in the power of His word will soon meet opposition.

This is the subject of our next verse: "Redeem me from the oppression of man, that I may keep Your precepts." I think that in twenty-first century Britain one of the greatest oppositions that we face is that of despondency. We have tried to serve the Lord and it does not seem to achieve anything. We have preached the Gospel and no-one is saved. We have tried to teach His word and others just go their own way. Modern Christianity is so lukewarm that He is preparing to spew the religious world out of His mouth. Is there any point in carrying on the struggle?

As a young lad I loved reading the Ladybird series of books on historical characters. One that really had an impact was the story of Captain Scott. The selfless heroism of Captain Oates and the accomplishment of human endeavour were sure to fire the imagination of a young boy. However, I could never really understand why they entered their tent that last fateful time and never came out. After all, had they known it, they were so close to the next food dump compared to the hundreds of miles they had already covered. If only! We stand on the threshold of eternity and the Lord may come at any moment. Now is not the time for slack hands and weak knees. Now is the time for selflessness and energetic endeavour. If we only knew what lies just around the corner, just beyond the material horizon. The eternity that beckons is so vastly superior to anything that we have imagined. May we this morning be inspired to keep His precepts and live out the truth of His word in a lovely and welcoming display of real Christianity. Not for us the stuff that most play at – that fills a Sunday and ensures we have a suit in the wardrobe. His word calls us to lay down our lives, to deny ourselves and to follow Him into our workplace, or the mission field, through thick and thin regardless of the cost!

For the one who overcomes we have the promise of untold glory. So the Psalmist continues his meditation on the word by saying: "Make Your face shine upon Your servant, and teach me Your statutes." This verse echoes the priestly prayer of Aaron in Numbers 6:24 - 26: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace." What a lovely prayer – simple and beautiful! What an enormous privilege to have the face of God shining upon us. I believe that it is something that the Lord experienced in His own life as He was baptised. The heavens were opened and the voice proclaimed the pleasure of God in His well beloved Son. Here was a Man who deservedly lived in the sunshine of God's face. Jesus was the one who always did those things that pleased His Father. The pleasure of God was of utmost importance to the Lord Jesus in all things. I wonder how much does the pleasure of God mean to me. Does it even matter at all? Perhaps you can remember back to your courting days when the pleasure of your partner was very much a matter of concern. It really mattered. Perhaps not so much now. How sad if we have really lost the desire to have the face of God shine upon us!

Still the Psalmist would learn more of God's word. Here we are 135 verses in and his prayer is "teach me Your statutes." No matter how long we have been a believer, no matter how long we have learnt from His word, no matter how often we have read it through from cover to cover, we need to retain a teachable heart with a desire to learn more. In this life, the only things that do not grow are dead!

Finally, we come to the last verse in this section: "Rivers of water run down from my eyes, because men do not keep Your law." What a challenge to conclude with! Here the Psalmist displays

a sensitivity of heart to the things of God. He was deeply upset about the moral condition of the society in which he lived. There was real anguish as he saw the sinfulness of those around him. Jesus Himself is the greatest example of this moral sensitivity. In Luke 19:41 we read, "Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it." In John 11:35 we simply read, "Jesus wept." Sin and the resultant death had no place in His creation, it ought not to have been. There was a holy rage as well as a tender sympathy that brought the Lord to tears. He truly knew what it was to be a holy Man in an unholy world, and it hurt!

Sadly, today, so often my response may be a weary shrug of the shoulders as yet another Christian is accused of wrong doing, or a 'well, what do you expect from the lost?' as some sickening crime hits the news. That is simply not good enough. By spending time in His word my conscience and moral sensitivity will be conformed to God's way of thinking and I will see wrong for what it truly is – an offence against God and rebellion against His authority. Surely then, I too will be deeply affected, maybe even to tears by the state of our society. God does not need any more judges – He has that task in hand. He does need those broken hearted individuals who are ready to stand up against the moral decline of our age and graciously demonstrate how simple and complete obedience to His word is just so much better in all ways and for all times. Are you such a person?

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Psalm 119 The importance of God's word, verses 129 - 136 talk number T1122.

New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless stated otherwise.

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