

PSALM
119

The anonymous psalmist who wrote this longest psalm sought refuge from his persecutors and found strength by meditating on the Word of God. This psalm, the longest chapter in the Bible, is largely a collection or anthology of prayers and thoughts about God's Word. C. S. Lewis compared it to a piece of embroidery, done stitch by stitch in the quiet hours for the love of the subject and for the delight in leisurely, disciplined craftsmanship.⁷⁵¹ Read this psalm when you feel the need for greater wisdom.

"The author of Psalm 119 exemplifies an attitude toward the Mosaic law which was the ideal for all Israel (cf. also 19:7-11)."⁷⁵²

"It [this psalm] describes how the Word enables us to grow in holiness and handle the persecutions and pressures that always accompany an obedient walk of faith."⁷⁵³

⁷⁴⁹Leupold, p. 820.

⁷⁵⁰For a summary discussion of the messianic psalms, see *The New Scofield . . .*, p. 659.

⁷⁵¹Lewis, *Reflections on . . .*, pp. 58-59.

⁷⁵²Chisholm, "A Theology . . .," p. 263.

⁷⁵³Wiersbe, *The . . . Wisdom . . .*, p. 308.

"Essentially a didactic poem, this psalm takes the form of a personal testimony."⁷⁵⁴

"Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this psalm is its unusual length, 176 verses. The theme, generally speaking, is the Word of God. The primary emphasis of such lengthy praises of the Word must then be that the man of God cannot weary in extolling the merits of the Word of the Lord."⁷⁵⁵

This psalm contains a reference to God's Word in almost every verse (except verses 84, 90, 121, 122, and 132). (The Jews claimed that only one verse did not refer directly to God's Word: verse 122.⁷⁵⁶) The psalmist used at least eight synonyms for the Word of God, each of which conveys a slightly different emphasis.⁷⁵⁷ However, sometimes it appears that the writer chose a synonym simply to avoid repetition.

"Way" and "ways" (Heb. *derek*) describes the pattern of life God's revelation marks out. It occurs 13 times in the psalm (vv. 1, 3, 5, 14, 26, 27, 29, 30, 32, 33, 37, 59, 168).

A frequently used term is "law" (Heb. *torah*, lit. teaching) that occurs 25 times (vv. 1, 18, 29, 34, 44, 51, 53, 55, 61, 70, 72, 77, 85, 92, 97, 109, 113, 126, 136, 142, 150, 153, 163, 165, 174). It denotes direction or instruction and usually refers to a body of teaching such as the Pentateuch or the Book of Deuteronomy. Jesus used this term to describe the whole Old Testament (John 10:34). The Apostle Paul often referred to the strict demands of the Law of God, but this psalmist usually meant the Word of God when he referred to "the law."

The word "testimony" (Heb. *'edot*) occurs 23 times, all but one time in the plural (vv. 2, 14, 22, 24, 31, 36, 46, 59, 79, 88 [sing.], 95, 99, 111, 119, 125, 129, 138, 144, 146, 152, 157, 167, 168). It refers to the ordinances that became God's standard of conduct. Its particular shade of meaning is the solemnity of what God has spoken as His will. The English translations sometimes have "decrees" for this Hebrew word.

"Precepts" (Heb. *piqqudim*), a synonym for "injunctions" that occurs only in the psalms in the Old Testament, appears 21 times in this psalm (vv. 4, 15, 27, 40, 45, 56, 63, 69, 78,

87, 93, 94, 100, 104, 110, 128, 134, 141, 159, 168, 173). It always occurs in the plural.

Another common synonym in this psalm is "statutes" (Heb. *huqqim*, lit. things inscribed). It refers to enacted laws. The translators sometimes rendered the Hebrew word "decrees." It occurs 21 times (vv. 5, 8, 12, 23, 26, 33, 48, 54, 64, 68, 71, 80, 83, 112, 117, 118, 124, 135, 145, 155, 171).

⁷⁵⁴Yates,

p. 539.

⁷⁵⁵Leupold,

p. 821.

⁷⁵⁶Delitzsch,

3:243.

⁷⁵⁷Leupold, p. 822, claimed that there are 10 synonyms, but he did not list the Hebrew words.

"Commandments" (Heb. *miswot*) denotes a definite authoritative command. The writer used this word 22 times in Psalm 119, usually in the plural but once as a collective singular (vv. 6, 10, 19, 21, 32, 35, 47, 48, 60, 66, 73, 86, 96 [sing.], 98, 115, 127, 131, 143, 151, 166, 172, 176).

"Judgment" or "ordinance" (Heb. *mishpot*) refers to a judicial decision that establishes precedent and constitutes binding law. Often the English translators rendered this Hebrew word "laws." It sometimes means God's acts of judgment on the wicked. In this psalm it occurs 23 times in the plural and four times in the singular (vv. 7, 13, 20, 30, 39, 43, 52, 62, 75, 84 [sing.], 91, 102, 106, 108, 120, 121 [sing.], 132 [sing.], 137, 149 [sing.], 156, 160, 164, 175). In verse 84 it does not refer to the Word of God, however.

The psalmist also identified many different responses he made to God's "Word" (Heb. *dabar*). One of these was keeping or obeying it (vv. 4, 5, 8, 17, 34, 44, 56, 57, 60, 67, 88, 100, 101, 129, 134, 136, 145, 158, 167, 168). This general term for God's revelation occurs 39 times.

"This untiring emphasis has led some to accuse the psalmist of worshipping the Word rather than the Lord; but it has been well remarked that every reference here to Scripture, without exception, relates it explicitly to its Author; indeed every verse from 4 to the end is a prayer or affirmation addressed to Him. This is true piety; a love of God not desiccated by study but refreshed, informed and nourished by it."⁷⁵⁸

"The longest psalm in the Psalter, Psalm 119, is well known for its teaching on God's law. Yet the beauty of this psalm lies, not only in the recitation of devotion to the law, but in the psalmist's absolute devotion to the Lord."⁷⁵⁹

In all but 14 verses, the psalmist addressed his words to the Lord personally.⁷⁶⁰

This is one of the alphabetic acrostic psalms (cf. Pss. 111, 112). In each strophe of eight verses, each verse begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In verses 1-8 each line begins with the first Hebrew letter, in verses 9-16 each line begins with the second Hebrew letter, and so on. In some

English versions, the translators have printed or transliterated the Hebrew letter that begins each line in the strophe at the beginning of that strophe. It may be no accident that the name "Yahweh" appears 22 times—the same number as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.⁷⁶¹

"Even the literary qualities of the 119th Psalm contribute to the development of its major theme—the Word of God in the child of God."⁷⁶²

⁷⁵⁸Kidner, *Psalms 73—150*, p. 419.

⁷⁵⁹VanGemeren, p. 736. See also Yates, p. 540.

⁷⁶⁰Wiersbe, *The . . . Wisdom . . .*, p. 308.

⁷⁶¹Delitzsch, 3:243.

⁷⁶²George J. Zemek Jr., "The Word of God in the Child of God: Psalm 119," *Spire* 10:2 (1982):8.

Psalm 145 is another acrostic psalm. In that psalm the intent of the acrostic structure seems to have been to encourage full *praise* of God. In this one, the intent seems to have been to encourage full *obedience* to God.⁷⁶³

The genre of the psalm is primarily wisdom, though there are also elements of lament, thanksgiving, praise, and confidence in it.

As you read this psalm, note the consequences of obeying God's Word that the writer enumerated. These include being unashamed (v. 6) and giving thanks (v. 7).

". . . here we have set forth in inexhaustible fullness what the word of God is to a man, and how a man is to behave himself in relation to it."⁷⁶⁴

"The basic theme of Psalm 119 is the practical use of the Word of God in the life of the believer."⁷⁶⁵

"The lesson to be learned above all others is that knowledge and practical application of the Word will keep one from sin and thus enable him to know and serve God appropriately (119:9, 11, 92, 98, 105, 130, 133, 176)."⁷
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1. The blessing of obeying God's Word 119:1-8

The writer rejoiced in the fact that people who obey God's Word ("law") wholeheartedly enjoy His blessing (vv. 1-3). Consequently he wanted to be more consistently obedient himself (vv. 4-6). He promised to be more thankful as he continued to learn more about God's Word (vv. 7-8).

"The love for God receives expression in doing the will of God."⁷⁶⁷

"In practice you praise God by esteeming His Word so precious that you make it your business to learn it. Such learning is an act of praise [v. 7]."⁷⁶⁸

2. The cleansing power of God's Word **119:9-16**

A person can cleanse his or her conduct by obeying the Word of God (v. 9). The writer testified that he had internalized and delighted in God's Word to maintain moral purity (vv. 10-14). He made it a practice to think about God's

revelation continually (vv. 15-16; cf. 17:4).

763 Brueggeman

n. p. 39.

764 Delitzsch,

3:243.

765 Wiersbe, *The . . . Wisdom*

. . . , p. 309.

766 Merrill,

"Psalms," p. 466.

767 VanGemeren,

p. 739.

768 Leupold,

p. 825.

"The act of 'hiding' God's word is not to be limited to the memorization of individual texts or even whole passages but extends to a holistic living in devotion to the Lord (cf. Deut 6:4-9; 30:14; Jer 31:33)."⁷⁶⁹

"Clearly this psalm probes beyond the simplistic formulation of Psalm 1. A life of full obedience is not a conclusion of faith. It is a beginning point and an access to a life filled with many-sided communion with God."⁷⁷⁰

"The whole Psalm is a prayer for steadfastness [*sic* steadfastness] in the midst of an ungodly, degenerate race, and in the midst of great trouble, which is heightened by the pain he feels at the prevailing apostasy, and a prayer for ultimate deliverance which rises in group *Kaph* to an urgent *how long!*"⁷⁷¹

The word "path" (Heb. *'orah*) is a synonym for "way." It occurs five times in this psalm

(vv. 9, 15, 101, 104, 128).

Another important synonym for God's law is "word" (Heb. *dabar*) that I have found 23 times (vv. 9, 16, 17, 25, 28, 42, 43, 49, 57, 65, 74, 81, 89, 101, 105, 107, 114, 130, 139, 147, 160, 161, 169). It is a general term for God's revelation that proceeds from His mouth.

A poetical synonym for "word" is "saying" (Heb. *'imrah*) that the translators have sometimes rendered "promise." It occurs 19 times (vv. 11, 38, 41, 50, 58, 67, 76, 82, 103, 116, 123, 133, 140, 148, 154, 158, 162, 170, 172).

Other responses to God's Word that the writer mentioned and that occur first in this section are "rejoicing" (vv. 14, 74, 162), "meditating" (vv. 15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148), and "delighting" (vv. 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174).

3. An appreciation for God's Word 119:17-24

The psalmist's prayer for God to illuminate his understanding concerning His Word is one that all God's people need to pray (vv. 17-18). Verses 19 and 20 reflect the writer's great appetite for the Word. In contrast to the wicked, whom the psalmist asked God to remove, he delighted in God's

Word (vv. 21-24). The wicked who oppress those who love the Scriptures come into view quite often in this psalm (vv. 23, 53, 61, 69, 70, 78, 85, 86, 87, 95, 110, 115, 119, 122, 134, 155, 157, 158, 161).

One of the writer's favorite titles for himself in this psalm was God's "servant" (vv. 17, 23, 38, 49, 65, 76, 84, 124, 125, 135, 140, 176).

⁷⁶⁹VanGemenen, p. 740. Cf. Delitzsch, 3:246.

⁷⁷⁰Brueggemann, p. 41.

⁷⁷¹Delitzsch, 3:243-44.

4. A prayer for greater understanding 119:25-32

The writer felt the need of the refreshment that God's Word can provide (v. 25; cf. 37, 40, 50, 93, 107, 149, 154, 156). He then called on the Lord for understanding, strength, and security (vv. 26-29). He promised to obey God when he received greater understanding because he valued the law highly (vv. 30-32).

5. Loyal commitment to God's Word 119:33-40

The psalmist professed wholehearted loyalty to God's statutes (vv. 33-35). He asked Yahweh to keep him from covetousness and vanity (vv. 36-37). He wanted God to root the Word deeply in his life (vv. 38-40).

6. God's Word and salvation 119:41-48

The writer called for God to deliver him by His love and in fulfillment of His promise (v. 41). This would give him an answer for his adversary (v. 42). Then he prayed and promised that the Lord's Word would continue to direct him (vv. 43-46).

"The case [in verse 46] is hypothetical. He means: Should the opportunity ever present itself to testify to the excellency of God's Word and law, I shall by no means hesitate, and I refuse to be ashamed."⁷⁷²

He said he loved God's commandments (vv. 47-48). Loving the Word of God is another frequently expressed response to it in this psalm (vv. 47, 48, 97, 113, 119, 127, 132, 159, 163, 165, 167).

7. God's Word as a source of hope 119:49-56

The poet next expressed his hope in God's Word (v. 49). He said it renews life (v. 50). He despised the proud who scorn faith in God and have no use for His law (vv. 51-53; cf. vv. 69, 78, 85). In contrast, he sang and thought about God's precepts even at night (vv. 54-56).

"Remembering [v. 49] is not recalling, for God never forgets; it is relating to His people in a special way."⁷⁷³

8. Strong commitment to God's Word 119:57-64

The psalmist called on God for mercy because God was his chosen portion in life (vv. 57-58). He professed having lived in keeping with what God had commanded (vv. 58-60), even when his enemies intimidated him (vv. 61-62). He had made others his companions, who followed God's law as he did (vv. 63-64).

⁷⁷²Leupold, p. 833.

⁷⁷³Wiersbe, *The . . . Wisdom . . .*, p. 317.

"To understand and to keep God's word is his portion, the object of his incessant praying and thanksgiving, the highest grace or favour that can come to him."⁷⁷⁴

9. Confidence in the Word of God 119:65-72

The writer relied on the fact that God would deal with him according to what He had revealed (v. 65). However, he felt the need for further instruction to prevent him from wandering away from God's will (vv. 66-68). He would trust in God even though other people slandered Him (vv. 69-70). Affliction had taught him to appreciate God's statutes more than he had previously done (vv. 71-72).

10. God's Word as an object of hope 119:73-80

God had fashioned the psalmist, who now called on the Lord to use him to encourage other godly people (vv. 73-74). He needed comfort, and asked God to frustrate the arrogant who opposed him (vv. 75-78). He prayed that other godly people would encourage him, and that he would continue to walk in God's ways (vv. 79-80).

11. The reliability of God's Word 119:81-88

The poet had almost given up as he waited for God to save him from his enemies, but he found God's revelation to be a reliable source of strength (vv. 81-82). Feeling similar to a wineskin shriveled up by the smoke of a fire, he asked God how much longer he would have to wait for salvation (vv. 83-86).

"The contrast with the second half of the verse [v. 83] suggests that this wineskin represents a forgotten object, the point being that, even though God seems to forget His servant, he on his part has not forgotten the statutes of the Lord to which he is obligated."⁷⁷⁵

In spite of severe attacks by his enemies, he had remained true to God's ways and requested safe keeping (vv. 87-88; cf. v. 159).

"When the Father allows His children to go into the furnace of affliction, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat."⁷⁷⁶

12. The permanence of God's Word 119:89-96

The permanence of God's Word is evident in that God has preserved it in heaven and faithfully keeps it secure there (vv. 89-91). Because the writer

delighted in this firm Word, he could gain the victory over his affliction (vv. 92-95). Everything else that is good has limitations, but the Word of God is boundless in its value (v. 96).

⁷⁷⁴Delitzsch,
3:251.

⁷⁷⁵Leupold,
p. 841.

⁷⁷⁶Wiersbe, *The . . . Wisdom*
. . . , p. 322.

In 1542, Martin Luther wrote the words of verse 92 on his Bible with his own hand.⁷⁷⁷ At this time much of his reforming work was behind him, and he lived only four more years.

13. The sweetness of God's Word 119:97-104

The psalmist loved God's law because it gave him more wisdom than his enemies, his teachers, and the elderly sages who did not have it (vv. 97-100). It had enabled him to maintain his personal purity (vv. 101-102, cf. vv. 9, 104). God's promises were particularly sweet to him (v. 103).

"While God's truth is food for our souls, it is not a 'buffet' from which we select only the things we like."⁷⁷⁸

". . . those for whom prophetic doctrine is tasteless ought to be thought of as lacking taste buds."⁷⁷⁹

14. The illumination God's Word provides 119:105-112

God's revelation is a light that illuminates the path of life, and for this reason the poet determined to follow it (vv. 105-106; cf. v. 130; Prov. 6:23). The Scriptures give us the information we need to determine God's will. The writer had called on God for help while meditating on His Word (vv. 107-110), and he would continue to follow it forever (vv. 111-112).

15. The reverence God's Word inspires 119:113-120

Double-minded people disregard God's revelation (v. 113), but those who value it make God their refuge and defense (v. 114). The writer wanted evildoers to depart from him so he could keep God's commandments (v. 115). He called on the Lord to sustain and deliver him (vv. 116-117), because He would judge those who despised His Word (vv. 118-119). God's judgments made him tremble because they are sure (v. 120).

16. The vindication of those who keep God's Word 119:121-128

The first four verses of this pericope are a strong plea for protection from the antagonism of people who do not follow God's Word (vv. 121-124). The psalmist appealed to God for safety because he had faithfully observed His will (vv. 125-126). He claimed to value God's laws more highly than gold and to hate every false way (vv. 127-128).

17. The wonder of God's Word 119:129-136

The testimonies of the Lord are wonderful because they illuminate the understanding of the simple (vv. 129-130). The psalmist felt a great need for them (v. 131). He asked God

⁷⁷⁷Ker, p. 148.

⁷⁷⁸Wiersbe, *The . . . Wisdom . . .*, p. 324.

⁷⁷⁹Calvin, *Institutes of . . .*, 1:8:2. By "prophetic doctrine," he was probably referring to all Scripture.

to favor him graciously by strengthening him in the Word and by redeeming him from his oppressors (vv. 132-135). The disobedience of his enemies caused him to weep (v. 136).

18. The righteous character of God's Word 119:137-144

The righteous God has given us a righteous Word (vv. 137-138). The psalmist had a pure zeal for God's revelation, even though his enemies looked down on him for his commitment to it (vv. 139-142).

"The world may look upon God's people as 'small and despised,' but when you stand on God's promises, you are a giant."⁷⁸⁰

The writer found comfort in God's righteous testimonies when troubles overwhelmed him (vv. 143-144).

19. The truth of God's Word 119:145-152

The psalmist called on God to deliver him because he promised to keep His commandments (vv. 145-149). He contrasted his condition with that of his enemies (v. 150). He knew God was near him since His testimonies were true (vv. 151-152).

20. Love for God's Word 119:153-160

Again the writer prayed for deliverance, appealing to his commitment to God's law (vv. 153-154). The wicked have little hope of salvation because they disregard God's Word (v. 155). However, the psalmist could have hope because He valued it (v. 156). The righteous have many enemies who despise God's revelation (vv. 157-158). The poet appealed for personal restoration because he loved the righteous law (vv. 159-160).

21. Joy in God's Word 119:161-168

The opposition of powerful individuals did not intimidate the writer (v. 161). He continued to love God's Word and to find it a ceaseless source of joy, but he hated falsehood (vv. 162-164).

"Seven [times, v. 164] merely signifies a comparatively large number as Ps. 12:7 would also seem to indicate. . . . This

frequent praising of the Word is what the writer regularly does
..."⁷⁸¹

Great peace (Heb. *shalom*, the fullness of God's blessings) is the portion of those who love God's law and hope in His salvation (vv. 165-166). Love had motivated the writer to keep the Lord's commandments and to live openly before God (vv. 167-168).

⁷⁸⁰Wiersbe,

p. 329.

⁷⁸¹Leupold, pp.
858-59.

"The joy, devotion, and benefits of a godly life radiate through this strophe."⁷⁸²

22. Salvation in God's Word 119:169-176

The psalmist called to the Lord again to hear his supplication and to save him (vv. 169-170). He wanted to praise God for His righteous commandments (vv. 171-172). He requested continued life because he loved God's law (vv. 173-175). Finally, he confessed to wandering away from God and being in danger, like a sheep, but he asked the Lord to seek him and bring him back to the fold, since he had not abandoned God's Word.

This great and unique psalm should impress the importance of the Word of God on every reader. Apparently the writer worked his way through the Hebrew alphabet selecting key words that express the various aspects of human life. He then related each one to the Word of God and so showed how it touches every area of life and is essential to all of life. He did not just give us a catalogue of the values of Scripture. Instead he showed us how the Word is relevant and invaluable in all types of situations that the godly face. The frequent references to enemies, affliction, persecution, and adversaries keep us in touch with real life as we read this psalm. In this way, the psalmist illustrated the absolute importance of what God has revealed as an adequate resource and indispensable guide through life. This psalm is not only a record of praise for God's revelation, but it is also a revelation of the importance of God's Word (cf. 138:2, NIV).