

# God's Word Is Sublime

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Date: 09 October 2022

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good morning again. I'm delighted to see you all, delighted to have an opportunity to be here and to celebrate this baptism. Before we do that, we're going to open God's Word together. We're starting a new series this week, and this series is going to take us well into the fall up to the season of Advent, which is around the first of the year in the Christian calendar. And so, all fall, we're going to be in a series called Read, Mark, Learn. And it's a series essentially looking at the doctrine of Scripture. We're going to be talking a lot about the relationship that we have with the written Word of God, with Scripture. And I think it's fair to say that probably most of us have a fairly complicated relationship with the Bible, especially depending on how or when or where we grew up. I know that some people here grew up in a very fundamentalist context, and the Bible was held up and touted and defended as infallible and inerrant. But now that you're getting older, you're wondering, are we really so sure about that? You have your doubts. Other people come from a very different context. They're in a world where people assume that the Bible is simply a book written by men to be used as a tool of the patriarchy, a tool for oppression to perpetuate and justify injustice.

And so, the Bible is almost seen as being evil or a justification for evil. And then there are other people who I think maybe some of us here who...we like the Bible, or at least parts of the Bible. There are other parts that we're not so sure about, and there are some parts that we definitely don't like that we find to be offensive. And so, we tend to stick to the parts that we like and just try to avoid or pretend like those other parts aren't there. And so, our relationship, I think, with the Bible is pretty complicated. And so, I want to start this series by asking this question. If that's the kind of relationship we have, pretty complicated, then what kind of relationship should we have with Scripture?

Or to put it another way, what kind of relationship could we have? What's possible? And for that, we're going to look at Psalm 119. We just recited a portion, a selection of Psalm 119, but it would take a little while if we tried to do the whole psalm in church. It's the longest chapter in the Bible. It's 176 verses, and it's actually, if you look at it in the Hebrew, it's an acrostic poem, which means that each stanza is eight verses, and each stanza starts with one of the letters of the Greek alphabet, and it goes in order. Aleph, Bet, Gimel, Daleth, all the way through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, 22 letters, stanza for each. It ends up being 176 verses. It's a very long chapter.

[ 2 : 5 6 ] But listen to some of these verses. As we think about what kind of relationship we might have with Scripture, listen to what it says. Verse 14, in the way of your testimonies, I delight as much as in all riches. Verse 20, my soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times. Or listen to verse 103, how sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. Now, that sounds like something that you would write to somebody that you are in love with, right? You should write something like that to your spouse.

Things will go well for you if you do. It conveys deep love and affection. For the psalmist, God's Word is more than just good advice. God's Word is sublime. He is absolutely enraptured by Scripture. This is romantic language. And what we see is that Psalm 119 is essentially a love poem about God's Word. It's a love poem. Now, why would the psalmist feel this way about text? And we can look at this psalm, and we don't have the time. Deborah won't allow me the time to go through all of the themes that we could draw out of Psalm 119. So, I'm going to pull three out, three of the central themes and reasons why the psalmist is so deeply in love with God's written Word. Let's pray, and then we will look at those reasons. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that, as we'll see, it's more than just text. You are the God who has promised to be in the midst of Your people and to speak to Your people. And so, we pray that even as we open Your written Word, we would hear Your voice and that we would encounter Your living Word, Jesus Christ.

And it's in His name that we pray. Amen. So, reason number one why this psalmist loves God's Word so much, number one, through Scripture, he is grounded in God's truth. He's grounded in God's truth.

He says in verse 1, blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. This sets the tone for the entire psalm. And notice that it refers not to the laws of the Lord, but the law of the Lord. The Hebrew word is Torah. And this isn't just referring to laws, it's a shorthand way of describing all of the Scriptures, right? Or what we would think of as the Old Testament. This is how actually Jesus referred to the Scriptures. In John chapter 15, Jesus quotes a psalm, and then He refers to that psalm as part of the law. Now, psalm is a poem. It's technically wisdom literature. It's not about law, but He considers it to be part of the law, meaning the Scriptures. And then look at verse 160. The sum of your Word is truth. This is not just saying that your Word is for the most part true. This is saying that every single part of your Word is truth. And there's a difference. And by the way, this is how Jesus viewed the Scriptures as well.

[ 6 : 22 ] All along the way, as we consider a doctrine of Scripture for ourselves, we're going to be looking at Jesus' doctrine of Scripture. Jesus says in John 17, He's praying for the church, and He says to the Father, sanctify them in the truth. Your Word is truth. Now, what does that mean? Well, when we say that something is true, we're saying that it corresponds to reality. A true statement corresponds to what is real. But when we say something is truth, we're saying something different. We are saying that this is the ultimate standard of reality itself. This is the thing against which reality is measured.

It's the thing that determines what is real and what is not. Maybe some of you have been to Greenwich, England, and you have seen the prime meridian there, and you have been able to stand on the line with one foot in each hemisphere. You know, when the prime meridian was established, it was absolutely world-changingly revolutionary. Why? Because it established a fixed point.

A fixed standard by which people could orient themselves in space and time. Once that standard was established, you could be anywhere on the globe and know where you were relative to that standard and when you were according to how time was broken up. And so, this allowed people to navigate. It allowed people to find their way all around the globe, which at this point in history was extremely important. So, through the Scriptures, God has established a kind of ultimate prime meridian for reality itself. It's a fixed position through which we can understand things like, who are we? Why are we here? Where are we in time and space and history and in God's unfolding plan? Where do we need to go from here? What is all of this moving toward? This is the information that we're able to glean from the prime meridian of Scripture. And as the psalmist says, verse 105, your word is a lamp to my feet and it's a light to my path. Verse 130, the unfolding of your words gives light. It imparts understanding. This imagery is not just poetry. It's not accidental. God's truth allows us to see where we are. It allows us to see where we need to go. It illuminates reality so that we know what is real and what's not, and it grounds us in that.

Now, I think probably most of us in this room, and the younger you are, probably the more true this is about you, most of us in this room get somewhat uncomfortable when anybody stands up on a stage and says, we know truth. This is absolute truth. We have it here, right? Number one, Christians need to understand that when we talk about truth in Scripture, that is not something that we have. That is not something that we can own, right? It has us, right? It owns us. We are entirely subject to it. We can do our best to describe it in ways that are accurate, to interpret it in ways that align, but we don't have it. We exist within it. It has us, and we do our best with humility and patience to understand it and describe it, right? So, that's the first thing. But the second thing is we need to understand the cultural context that we've grown up in. We've all grown up hearing pretty much throughout our lives the idea that anyone who claims any kind of truth is suspect because we have inherited ideas from people like Michel Foucault or Nietzsche, ideas that essentially say that all truth claims are power plays. And so, we've grown up in a culture that says we should eschew truth claims.

[ 10 : 33 ] And in fact, in many ways, the idea of truth as an objective reality has sort of faded, and we're encouraged to look inward and to look for our personal truth rather than the truth. But what we have realized if we look at history is a very different message, right? The real power play is not claiming that something is true. The real power play is not actually claiming that there is objective truth.

The real power play is abolishing the idea of truth altogether. Hannah Arendt is probably one of the most important political philosophers of the last century, and she writes and thinks extensively about the totalitarian regimes of World War II. And here's what she says, the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction and the distinction between true and false no longer exists. That's the ideal candidate for totalitarian rule. And that's the ideal candidate for the world. And that's the ideal candidate for the people's ability to know what is true and what is not. If you take away their ability to determine what is real and what is not, then you get to be the one to define reality. And that is the ultimate power play.

The idea that there is a standard of truth is profoundly good news for the world. It's good news for society because, as this example would say, it guards us against totalitarian rule on the right or the left because it gives us a standard of truth by which to measure human truth claims. So, when somebody stands up front and says, this is true, we have some prime meridian to look at and to say, that doesn't line up.

With what we see here. Or, as Martin Luther King Jr. says in his letter from a Birmingham jail, it guards us against injustice by giving us a standard of truth by which to measure human laws. So, no one can claim that their law is ultimate in authority. We have a higher standard that we can compare laws to. And God's truth isn't just good news for society, it's also good news for us as individuals. Because the Bible is the only book there is that will tell you the truth about yourself. [13:00] That will tell you the truth about yourself. Emile Callier was a philosopher and a professor at Princeton, and in his early life, he was entirely naturalistic, entirely materialistic. He didn't believe in any kind supernatural God or creation. He was a pure materialist. And he had actually always forbidden religion in his home, so he had never seen a Bible. He had never come across a Bible.

So, in his young life, he was very passionate as a materialist. Then he goes to fight in World War I. And after that, all of his philosophy started to fall apart. He couldn't understand the world anymore. He couldn't understand himself anymore. None of his convictions that he had held to early in his life could explain World War I, nor could they explain what was going on inside him. And he was profoundly disoriented, and nothing could help. He had tried to write his own book of accumulating all of the best bits of wisdom that he had come across in his life, but when he sat down to read the book, he was deeply disappointed in its inadequacy. And then, through a series of providential circumstances, his wife brought home an old Bible one day that she had gotten at a used bookstore. And here's what he says, "I literally grabbed the book and rushed to my study with it." He flips open and just happens upon the teachings of Jesus, the Beatitudes. He says, "I read and read and read, "Now allowed with an indescribable warmth surging within. I could not find words to express my awe and wonder. And suddenly the realization dawned upon me, this was the book that would understand me.

I needed it so much, yet unaware I had attempted to write my own in vain." God's Word alone can understand us, explain us to ourselves. It uncovers the things in our hearts that we can't see, don't want to see. The more time you spend reading the Bible, and I've certainly found this to be true, the more you spend time reading the Bible, the more you realize it's actually reading you. It reads you. You have these moments of feeling exposed, found out, illuminated.

It uncovers things in our hearts, tells us things that we either couldn't or wouldn't see before. So this is the first reason why the psalmist loves God's Word so much. It gives him access to God's truth, and it grounds him in that. And by it, he can orient himself to reality.

[15:46] The second reason why he loves Scripture so much is this. He finds that through Scripture, he is liberated, he's liberated by God's goodness. Verses 44 and 45 are curious. Just listen to this.

Tell me if it makes sense to you. I will keep your law continually, forever and ever. And then it says in verse 45, "And I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts." Now, that's a Hebrew idiom that means, I'll be free. I'll walk in a wide place. I'll be totally free, unencumbered. So here's what he's saying. I'm going to keep your law continually in every area of my life always, and by that, I'm going to be free. I'm going to do whatever I want. Now, how does that make sense? By keeping this law continually in every area of your life, you're going to walk in a wide... It sounds like you're going to walk in a very, very, very narrow place. But no, you're going to walk in a wide place. And to many of us, this might sound actually like the opposite of freedom because our way of thinking about freedom is to define it in terms of autonomy, you know, to be a law unto ourselves.

Freedom means unconstrained freedom of choice. So that's how a kind of Western person living at this point in history would automatically define freedom, unconstrained freedom to do whatever I want.

No boundaries. But what we need to ask is, does that actually line up? Does that kind of freedom actually work in real life? So consider the following examples. First example, maybe we think that we should be free to eat whatever we want. Maybe, maybe, man, I, you know, as I live in a free country, I can do what I want, whatever I want. Nobody will hold me accountable. I can eat and drink whatever I want. If it were up to me, if you know anything about me at all, you know that I think that there should be three basic food groups, cheeseburgers, barbecue, and whiskey. And that's essentially it. That's essentially it. It's essentially the Ron Swanson diet, if you know anything about him. And, you know, I could exercise my freedom and live on that diet, but what's going to happen? Right? I'm either going to become an alcoholic or I'm going to die a premature, horrible death. Right? But it's not going to go well for me. And the point is, staying free from things like addiction, premature death, that requires a lot of self-control, which means giving up freedom.

[18:13] Right? Let me give you another example. Maybe, maybe we think that freedom means being able to go wherever we want or to be whoever we want. Some people are so committed to being able to do what they want, when they want, go where they want, live where they want, that they are very reticent to commit to any one place for too long. They're very, very nervous about committing themselves to a community, to a church, committing themselves to a marriage. Right? I still remember a friend of mine from college who, you know, I went to visit him and I asked what had happened to the girl that he was dating. She was really great. And he'd broken up with her and gone to somebody else. And I said, well, what happened? He said, well, that's the problem with living here is that no matter who you're dating, around the corner, there's always somebody better. Right? So, still not married as far as I know. I think he's my age, he's 45, still not married because there's always something better out there. There's always, he's just ready, you know, he wants to keep his options open. Right?

But over time, what happens if you live in that kind of freedom? You want to keep your options open. Right? Over time, you end up being incredibly lonely and adrift. Right? Things like love, things like community, things like friendship, things like marriage, those require commitment. Which means what? Giving up a fair amount of freedom. Right? One final example, maybe I want to sit down at that piano over there and maybe I want to play Beethoven. Maybe I've got a little Rachmaninoff that I just want to get out there, you know, and express that to you. Right? Maybe I'm feeling moved by the Spirit to do that. Now, I'm free to try, but it's not going to go well for us. And the reason is because I have no idea how to play the piano. Right? If I wanted to be able to do that, you know, when Hillary, when Hillary plays piano, there's a freedom in what she's doing, but where did that freedom come from? It came through the fact that for years and years and years and years and years, she gave up lots of other things in her life and devoted herself to practicing the piano. And so, if you were to say to Hillary, can you sit down and play some Beethoven? She could do it. And it would seem effortless. Right? It would seem effortless. But that's the product of giving up a whole lot of freedom in order to train and practice. Right? So, what we see with each of these examples is that certain kinds of freedom, the highest, best forms of freedom, actually require sacrificing other forms of freedom. Right? It's not as simple as saying freedom is the ability to do whatever I want. And so, what we see in Scripture is a much better, much more nuanced definition of freedom. Freedom isn't just unconstrained choice without boundaries.

True freedom means finding the right kinds of boundaries that liberate us to be fully alive, that liberate us to be fully who we were created to be. That's true freedom. You know, there's a reason why immediately after liberating the Israelites from 400 years of slavery, one of the first things God does is to give them the law. They've lived in slavery for 400 years. They've only ever always known slavery all the time. Had somebody else telling them what to do, when to do it, what they could eat, you know, they could never stop working. God says, you need to learn how to be free. I can't just unleash you in the world. What are you going to do? You're going to go right back into slavery.

[21:44] It's all you know. You need to learn how to be free as individuals, as a society. Here is a law. Here are the right boundaries that if you follow them will teach your hearts how to be free hearts rather than slave hearts.

Right? So, the second reason the psalmist loves God's Word is because it gives him the right boundaries that lead to freedom and flourishing. He says, I'm going to follow your precepts and that

will allow me to walk in a wide place. Right? And then the third reason that we see in Psalm 119 why the psalmist loves God's Word so much, through Scripture he is captivated by God's beauty. He's captivated by God's beauty. Verses 35 through 37, lead me in the path of your commandments for I delight in it.

I delight in it. Captivated by beauty. Incline my heart to your testimonies and not to selfish gain.

Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things and give me life in your ways.

The word for worthless things can also be translated as idols, and it often is. The Bible says that our core problem, the reason that we aren't the kind of people we want to be, that we do things that we don't want to do, the reason that we're broken, the reason the world is broken is because of idolatry. Because we as human beings take good things, this is a good thing that God has given me, and we elevate them into ultimate things. And that becomes the thing, the only thing that I want, the only thing that I live for. It's the reason I get out of bed in the morning is this thing. It's a thing that I'm meant to receive from God and to thank God for, but I allow it to become God. And when that thing is allowed to be a God in my life, that's when things go off the rails.

And anything can become an idol. Safety can become an idol. Comfort, convenience, family, kids, career, all of the good things that we love and give ourselves to in the world, they can all become idols. And no matter what, what we see again and again and again is whatever we turn into an idol, if we worship anything other than God as ultimate, it's going to wreck our lives.

[ 23 : 57 ] If you worship safety, and if you build your life around always staying safe and avoiding risk, what's going to happen? Well, you're always going to feel anxiety. You're always going to feel fear because you're always going to worry that you're not actually safe. You know, did I remember to turn that off? Did I remember to lock that? You're always going to worry you're not going to feel safe.

There's going to be no peace in that. And then you're going to start to refuse to actually live your life and inhabit your life because risk is unavoidable in life. But if you build your life around safety, if that's your idol, you're going to imprison yourself in a cage of your own fear.

If you worship family, you know, a lot of cultures would say there's nothing better than family. If that's where you find all your meaning, you're going to crush your family under the weight of your expectations and needs. You're going to need them to be something that nobody can be, an ultimate source of meaning for you. What happens when your kids don't do well in school? What happens when your marriage falls apart despite all your best efforts?

What happens when there are behavioral issues that you need to deal with and the principal wants to meet with you, right? What happens when you look around and all of your friends' kids seem perfect and your kids seem like they've got all kinds of issues? And what does that say about you? If family is an idol, that's going to destroy you because what meaning is there for me in life? What purpose is there in life now that I've failed at this, right? If you worship career, then what's going to happen is you're going to find that more and more and more, you will do whatever it takes to succeed. You're going to sacrifice friendships, you're going to sacrifice maybe your family or a chance at having a family, and then ultimately you might even find that you're sacrificing little bits of your own integrity here and there because the ultimate thing for you is success. And what the Bible says is that God is the only one in existence who, if we worship Him, leads us to greater freedom and flourishing. Everything else leads us back into captivity. But giving up our idols is not easy because we're captivated by them. That's what the word means.

[ 26 : 03 ] You can't just walk out of a prison. You're captivated by these things. So, the only hope that Scripture says is that we need something more beautiful, something more captivating to come along and displace that idol. They need to be forcibly removed from our hearts. And this is that great phrase that comes from the Scottish preacher Thomas Chalmers, who famously coined the phrase, he says, we need the expulsive power of a new affection. He says, what cannot be destroyed may be dispossessed. The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one. Something so beautiful and something so captivating comes in that the old love is cast out. It's replaced, right? In the light of this new love, this old thing seems pale and thin and vapid by comparison. And there's only one thing that can captivate us more than idols, which are very captivating, and that's the love of God, which is the most captivating thing in existence. And in fact, the Scripture does more than just speak about God's love. It promises that God's love will one day come, that God's love will one day come to His people.

Verse 41 says, Let your steadfast love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise. So, the third reason the psalmist loves Scripture is because it speaks of God's love, which is the greatest and most beautiful thing there is, a God who loves His people and would do anything to set them free. So, these are the three reasons the psalmist loves God's Word, because by it, he's grounded in God's truth, he's liberated by God's goodness, he's captivated by God's beauty. But as we read this psalm, just one final thought, as we read this psalm, we cannot help but notice that his love for God's Word seems to go even beyond all of this. He doesn't just love God's Word the way we might love a great novel. He actually seems to love God's Word like a person, right? He speaks of God's Word like someone might talk about the love of their life. He says, My soul is consumed with longing for your Word. Now, I love books. My happy place is to be surrounded by books. I feel like I'm with all of my friends when I'm around all of these books, and one of my favorite things to do in my life is to open a book that I love and to just have time to read it, right? I come alive when I get to do that. I've never said anything like this about a book. My soul is consumed with longing. It feels like melodrama, but it's not. How do we make sense of this? Well, over a thousand years later, the Apostle John realized something profound. The psalmist was right all along. God's Word is a person. And when John sat down to write his account of the birth and the life of Jesus, what did he say? The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, right? The Word became flesh. The psalmist is like, I knew it!

[ 29 : 39 ] I knew it! I knew there was someone here just on the other side of these pages. I knew that it was that love that I felt. I knew that that's who was speaking to me all the while, right? So, our relationship with Jesus and our relationship with God's Word are one in the same. Ultimately, God's Word points to the eternal Word of God, which is Jesus Christ. Why is God's Word filled with so much goodness and beauty and truth? Because it is all about and points to the one who is goodness and beauty and truth, the one who said Himself, I am the way and the truth and the life.

So, our relationship with Jesus and our relationship with God's Word, they are inextricably linked. That's why Jesus says to His disciples, if you love Me, keep My Word, right? So, for those of us who have a complicated relationship with Scripture, it's okay. But Jesus is the answer to that. If you want a better relationship with the written Word of God, then there's only one place to go, and that's to the living Word of God, Jesus Christ. That's where it starts. And so, my hope and my prayer is that as we dive into this series over the next few weeks, we will be able to take that truth and to dig in, and that we will actually see our relationship with Scripture shift and change as a result of Jesus' work in our hearts. And the series is called Read, Mark, Learn because we've taken that out of one of our prayers that we pray in the Anglican tradition. So, what I'd love to do is actually to end this by praying this prayer together. And so, I'd love to put that up on the screen if we have it, and then we'll pray it together. I don't know if you can see that. We see through a glass dimly. Here's how it goes. Let's pray.

Amen. Amen.