

Psalm 119

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[0:00] I came across Psalm 119 one morning, and what really struck me was that this psalmist really loves the Word of God. He really loves this book. He says things like, I open my mouth and I pant because I long for your commandments. And he compares the words of scripture to honey. He says they're better than treasure.

And I thought, man, I want to have that kind of love for God's Word. Like I've been a Christian long enough to know that'd be a really good thing for me. That'd produce really good fruit in my life. But if I'm honest with myself, there are plenty of times where I don't feel that way about the Bible.

And so I decided to really dig into this chapter. And as I was doing that, it kind of turned into a sermon. And then it was my turn to preach. So here we are this morning.

I've got to use my clicker here. Maybe it's not going to work. I was going the wrong way.

So we're going to primarily focus on the first 16 verses of the psalm. But before we get there, we're going to talk a little bit about the structure of the psalm. Because that really matters. It's a very carefully structured psalm.

[1:17] So the two, probably the two observations that just about anyone who reads this psalm first makes, are that it's very long and it's very repetitive.

So it includes 176 verses, which makes it longer than 31 of the 66 books of the Bible. So if it were its own book of the Bible, it would be like an average length book.

So with 176 verses to work with, you might think that the psalmist is going to make a very complex argument. He's going to have a bunch of intricate sub points.

And yet that wasn't really my impression when I first read the psalm. It kind of felt like, you know, buddy, you're stuck on the same theme here. You know, like a record that's skipping, you know, and it's the same refrain over and over again.

Well, since this is the word of God, you know, we know that repetition isn't without purpose. There's a method to his madness. So Charles Spurgeon, who wrote more pages on the psalms than probably any of us could ever read, and quite a bit on this psalm in particular, had this to say, its expressions are as many as the waves, but its testimony is one as the sea.

[2:31] It deals all along with the same subject, and it consists of a vast number of verses, some of which are very similar to others, and yet throughout the 176 verses, the same thought is not repeated.

There's always a shade of difference, even when the color of the thought appears to be the same. It's charmingly varied from beginning to end. Its variety is that of a kaleidoscope.

From a few objects, a boundless variation is produced. In the kaleidoscope, you look once, and there's a strangely beautiful form. You shift the glass a little, and yet another shape, equally delicate and beautiful, is before your eyes.

So it is here. What you see is the same, and yet never the same. It's the same truth, but it's always placed in a new light, put in a new connection, or in some way or another, invested with freshness. So Spurgeon uses the analogy of a kaleidoscope. Others have used the analogy of a diamond to describe both this psalm and its depiction of the Word of God.

[3:30] So what at first glance might appear just to be rote repetition in this psalm is actually multifaceted beauty that parallels the beauty of the subject of the psalm, the Word of God.

So there's many facets to this diamond. We could talk about the sufficiency of Scripture. You know, everything that we need for life and for godliness is provided in God's Word. We could talk about the comfort that God's Word brings in suffering.

Matt, you know, we sang a song about lament today, and that is a theme that's woven through this psalm and through Scripture. We could talk about the inerrancy of God's Word, on and on.

So this psalm asserts all of these truths as well as many more, but we only have the time to cover one or two facets of the diamond. But I just want to say there's so much more in this psalm and in Scripture, of course.

Actually, when I first put this sermon together and I counted all the words and, you know, did a quick calculation, it was going to be like an hour and a half long sermon. And so I was like, we're going to have to cut back a little bit.

[4 : 31] Not going to put you guys through that. The, you know, the subject is definitely worthy of a sermon of that length, but I don't think I'm the guy to preach that sermon. So you can thank me later.

So this psalm is probably, like I said, it's probably one of the most carefully structured of all the 150 psalms. And so before we dig into the verse-by-verse exposition, it's really important to talk just briefly about that structure, because it's there for a reason.

And it's one that would actually be easily lost on us, because we can't read the psalm in its original language. But it would have been very striking to the original audience. So Psalm 119 is what's called an acrostic poem.

So that means it's organized by the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It's broken into stanzas of eight verses for each letter of the alphabet. So the first stanza of each verse, each line begins with the letter aleph, which is the first letter of the alphabet.

The second stanza, each line begins with beth, which is the second letter of the alphabet. And on through the alphabet. So none of that translates to English, right? Because we translate at the word and the concept letter, not at the level of the individual letter.

[5 : 43] But it is there. So why does that matter? Why does the acrostic structure matter? You know, is that just something that's kind of cool, and we can see that and say, wow, that's cool, and move on? Or is there more to it than that? Well, it's important to remember that composing the psalm in this way took a lot of effort for the psalmist.

That really restricted what he could say and how he could say it. So I don't think he did it just on a whim. I think there's at least three things that we can take from that structure.

So first, the word of God is inexhaustible. So the psalmist exhausts the entire alphabet without exhausting things that he can say about God's word. So that speaks to the limitlessness of scripture.

There's a sense in which we find that we'll never actually master the word of God. We'll never get to the place where we know all that there is to know about it. And in fact, the more that we read it, the more we memorize, the more we study it, the more we realize we don't know.

We're only scratching the surface of what's there. Second, the structure of Psalm 119 also communicates to us that God's word is complete. So he uses the complete alphabet.

[6 : 53] So we're not lacking revelation from God in any way. And then finally, the word of God is perfect. So like the structure of the Psalm, which the psalmist doesn't deviate from in any way, God's word is perfect.

So as we transition to our text this morning, it's important to keep in mind, we're gonna be talking about God's word. So it's important to keep in mind what our goal is when we open scripture.

So this is really important. We're actually gonna start in the same place that we end this morning. So what's our goal? Our goal when we open scripture is delight.

So the psalmist makes this abundantly clear. These are just a few of the verses in this psalm that reference the psalmist's delight in the word of God or the delight that he wants to have.

18 of the 22 stanzas of the psalm reference his delight in the word of God. And that's what really first captured me when I started reading this psalm. That's what I felt like I was missing.

[8 : 02] Now, when we talk about delight in God's word, we don't just mean that we love, you know, the words of this book. We do love the words of this book, but we love them because of who they reveal to us.

So when we love the word of God, when we talk about loving the word of God, we're really talking about loving the person, speaking the words.

The last book of the law, Deuteronomy, which is primarily what the psalmist would have had in mind when he uses the word law, which is one of the eight words that he uses to refer to God's word in this psalm.

Deuteronomy makes it crystal clear that the primary commandment is to love God with everything in us. And there's this clear connection between loving God and his word being on our hearts.

So Deuteronomy 6, 5 says, So yes, we delight in the words in God's word, but ultimately we delight in them because of who they reveal to us.

[9 : 19] And there's no greater pleasure than knowing and loving him. John Piper relates our love for the word of God with our love for Christ in this way. I love the Bible the way I love my eyes, not because my eyes are lovely, but because without them, I can't see what's lovely.

Without the Bible, I could not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. Without the Bible, I could not know the unsearchable riches of Christ. Without the Bible, I would not know that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great savior.

I love the Bible because it gives the wisdom that leads to salvation and shows me that this salvation is nothing less than seeing and savoring the glory of Christ forever and then provides for me inexhaustible ways of seeing and knowing and enjoying Christ.

So as we dig into the text this morning, I want to ask you, do you experience delight when you read God's word? Maybe you're in a place like I found myself where you have experienced delight in God's word in the past, but that's just not something you're experiencing right now.

Or maybe you've never experienced delight in the word of God. If that's you, if you're in either of those places that I described, I pray and I hope that you'll be encouraged by God's word this morning.

[10 : 40] Okay, so we've talked context and we've talked about the goal or the destination when we open our Bibles. So now we're going to dig into the text. Please open your Bibles with me if you have one to the first five verses of Psalm 119.

Or you can just read it up on the screen. Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.

You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. Oh, that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes. So the psalm opens with this double blessing.

Blessed are those, blessed are those for those who walk in a particular way. And we know that the focus is on a particular walk because of the fourfold repetition of walk and way.

So what does he mean by walk? Well, walk speaks to the quality of a person's life. It speaks to who they consistently show themselves to be by their actions. And it also has to do with the fact that life is a journey, right?

[11 : 53] We're all going somewhere and we're getting there in a certain way. So there's this blessing for those who go through life in a particular way. So the two key questions for us are how are we to walk?

And what is the blessing? So first, how are we to walk? So these first five verses make it clear that the blessed person has ordered their life in accordance with the word of God.

Their way is blameless, right? That's kind of an astonishing claim. They keep his testimonies. They walk in the Lord's ways. So if you're like me, when you first read this and you see whose way is blameless, who does no wrong, your heart sinks a little bit, right?

Like that's an impossible standard. But from the statement, they do no wrong, we know that this is an idealization, right? Romans 3.23, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

The psalmist isn't saying, this is who I am. He's saying, this is the target. This is who I want to become. And that interpretation of the text is confirmed by verse five. Oh, that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes.

[13 : 02] So he's expressing longing in verse five for the state that he's described in the first four verses. He's not claiming to have arrived. So this walk is not a life of sinless perfection.

In fact, the psalmist is actually very upfront throughout the entire psalm about his struggles with sin, which is the experience of all of us, this side of heaven, right? Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word.

I've gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments. That's actually the last verse in the psalm. So no, the walk is not a life of sinless perfection.

It's also not a life that pretends to be perfect. I think we all sense at one level or another that we're not perfect, but the person conformed to the word of God also doesn't pretend to be perfect or even mostly perfect, which is even more subtle.

The sense of verse eight here, I will keep your statutes. Do not utterly forsake me is that the psalmist has surveyed who he wants to be. And then he looks at himself and he sees his sin and he cries out to the Lord, don't forsake me.

[14:14] Don't give up on me. So there's no pretense here of perfection. So the life conformed to the word of God is not perfect, does not pretend to be perfect. Instead, this life demonstrates increasing conformity to the word of God and rejection of sin.

One of the metaphors for what the walk looks like day to day comes later on in the psalm, verse 105. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

So we talked about how life is like a journey and the person whose life is conformed to the word of God is using this book to guide them on their journey. And they're also turning away from sin.

Verse 71, It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes. They recognize that sin leads them off of the right path and away from the Lord. And finally, a life conformed to the word of God produces praise as we recognize that spiritual growth is ultimately an act of God's grace.

It's the fruit of the spirit at work in our lives. I planted, Apollos watered, but the Lord God gave the growth. It's God who produces growth.

[15:28] And so in this psalm, the psalmist pleads with God to produce growth in his life. I don't have it up on the screen, but the fifth stanza uses the words, teach me, give me understanding, lead me, incline my heart.

So the psalmist recognizes that God needs to be at work in his heart for his life to be conformed to the word of God. And when that happens, when he sees the Lord at work in his inner man, it leads to praise.

Verse 7, I will praise you with an upright heart when I learn your righteous rules. So Kent actually mentioned the Beale family in his sermon last week, so I think that makes the Leonard's fair game for a sermon illustration this week.

Like he mentioned, the Leonard's lived with us for a couple months at the end of last year, and that was just such a blessing to our family. Taco Tuesday was a great addition to the weekly meal calendar, but more substantially than that, it was just such a blessing to be in close proximity to people that are really growing in their faith.

That is something that's a huge blessing. I think Kent and Allison are both in a season in life where they're really growing. And when someone's really growing, when the Lord's working on your heart, that's evident from the outside, and it produces praise, right?

[16:56] Like that's the only appropriate reaction. So it was a really normal thing in the morning, you know, for Allison to come up to the kitchen after reading her Bible, you know, in her room, and just to be overflowing with praise for what the Lord was teaching her from his word.

You know, or Kent to be sharing something that he was learning as he was preparing for his sermon on John 1 and just to be praising the Lord for that. And so, when God's at work in someone's life, if it's truly the work of God, it's going to produce praise.

So we've talked about what the blessing is. Blessed are those whose way is blameless, or what the walk is. Blessed are those whose way is blameless who walk in the law of the Lord. So what is the blessing?

And it's important to define this blessing because if we don't understand what it means, we're either not going to desire it, or we're going to read into it something that's actually not promised. So there might be small alarm bells going off in your head, right?

Andrew's saying that obedience to God's word brings blessing. You know, I thought we were justified by faith alone. Yes and amen. This psalm is not teaching that our obedience is the grounds for our justification.

[18:10] If that were true, the psalmist himself would be in great spiritual danger. Like we've already talked about, he doesn't hide the fact that he's a sinner. No, our acceptance is not, is based on the steadfast love of the Lord, not based on our own righteousness.

Verse 124 says, deal with your servant according to your steadfast love. So the blessing of justification is not what's in view here. It's also not a life of peace and tranquility void of problems. It's clear from the context of the rest of the psalm that this guy experienced tremendous trials in his life. A few of the verses that touch on those trials are up on the screen.

I am a sojourner on the earth. My soul melts away for sorrow. The insolent utterly deride me. The cords of the wicked ensnare me. I ask, when will you comfort me?

For I become like a wineskin in the smoke. How long must your servant endure? I rise before dawn and cry for help. I hope in your words. Of the 22 stanzas in the psalm, 20 of them reference his trials.

[19 : 18] So that indicates that trials were a pretty constant companion in his life. And we're not really promised anything different either in this psalm or in the rest of scripture. So what is the blessing?

Well, it's actually not described in a straightforward manner in this psalm. The psalmist actually just shows us rather than telling us. So we need help from the wider context of the psalms to understand the blessing.

And the introduction to this psalm, Psalm 119, actually parallels pretty closely the introduction to the entire book of psalms, which is Psalm 1, which Matt read.

So we can actually go there for a clearer articulation of this blessing. So I'm not going to read it since Matt already read it, but note the parallels to Psalm 119.

Blessed is the man who walks. So again, we're talking about a blessing pronounced on those whose life has a particular quality. And then rather, this Psalm 1 man, rather than conforming his life to the wicked, he conforms it just like the person in Psalm 119 to the word of God.

[20 : 23] He delights in it. He meditates on it. But his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law, he meditates day and night. And so what's the result? So we're given this beautiful metaphor of the man as a tree planted by the stream.

And because the tree is planted by the stream, it's healthy. Its leaf doesn't wither and it's always fruitful. And it doesn't matter if drought comes and the drought does come, but the tree has a source of water, which is the word that never dries up.

So here we see the blessed life as one that's fruitful and secure. So this is a person, again, to whom drought does come, but his fruitfulness and vitality is not dependent on whether or not he's in a season of trouble because his vitality comes from a stream that never dries up.

So that's a life that everyone wants, right? This is a recession-proof life. It's a person who can't be shaken, not because of who he is, but because of where he's planted.

So this person lives a fruitful life rooted in delight in the word of God. And the second result, verse 6, unlike the wicked, his way is known by the Lord.

[21 : 35] So not only is he blessed with delight in the word of God, he's blessed with personal communion with God. So at this point, we've only talked about the outer evidence that a person's life is conformed to God's word, but a focus only on the outer person is incomplete, right?

You might have noticed that I skipped over the second part of verse 2. Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart. So scripture is clear that we consist both of an outer person and an inner person and that the Lord cares deeply about our hearts.

1 Samuel 16, 7 says, the Lord sees not as man sees. Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. To a certain extent, our outer man reflects who we are in the inside, but we can also fake it, right?

Jesus called the Pharisees whitewashed tombs because they looked good on the outside, but they were dead on the inside. He said to the Pharisees, outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

The person in Psalm 119 and in Psalm 1 is not faking it. He's conformed his life to the word of God, not just his outward actions, but his whole life. He seeks God with his whole heart, both his inner and outer manner aligned.

[23 : 01] So the question is, how? How do we live a life conformed to the word of God? And that's the exact question the psalmist asks in the next stanza.

Read with me verses 9 through 16. How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.

With my whole heart I seek you. Let me not wonder from your commandments. I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O Lord.

Teach me your statutes. With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.

I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes. I will not forget your words. So we're asking the same question as the psalmist.

[24 : 02] How can a person keep their way pure? Or in the words we've been using, how can a person conform their life to the word of God? Which as we saw in the first stanza produces a pure or blameless life.

So he answers his question by guarding it according to your word. And then I think he develops what that looks like in the remaining verses of the stanza. And then it's echoed throughout the remainder of the psalm.

So what does it look like to guard our way according to the word? Well it has to start with desire and longing longing for the Lord.

We saw longing in the last stanza. Oh that my ways may be steadfast. Right? And then we see more explicitly in verse 10 the object of his longing or desire.

With my whole heart I seek you. Later on in the psalm he says, the Lord is my portion. I promise to keep your words. So again we read God's word because we love him and we're seeking him.

[25 : 04] This desire for the Lord leads to a resolve to be disciplined. We resolve to make the space in our lives to spend time with the Lord in his word.

He says, I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. So why do we store up or memorize the word of God? He makes it really clear so that I might not sin against you. Ephesians tells us that the word of God is the sword of the spirit. So it's the one offensive weapon that the Holy Spirit uses as we battle sin in our lives. So if we haven't internalized much of the Bible we're not really giving the spirit much of a sword to wield.

So as he memorizes the word it actually becomes a part of his speech. With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth.

And finally his resolve to be disciplined includes meditation. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. So he takes chunks of scripture and he turns them over and over in his mind.

[26 : 16] Now you might think that meditation just really isn't something that you do. You know, you don't have time for it in your busy life to sit down and think about something slowly like that just doesn't jive with your life.

But the truth is that we're actually all meditating all the time. Our minds are in a state of always consuming information and dwelling on it and we're either doing it passively just taking whatever comes or we're doing it actively and choosing to at least some degree what comes in and what doesn't.

But we're all meditating all the time. And if the word of God is just one of the many streams that our minds consume and if it's just a small trickle you know next to the flowing rivers of news and entertainment and sports if we're just getting like 15 minutes a day of Bible and that's next to maybe an hour of ESPN on the phone an hour of Netflix after the kids go to bed 30 minutes maybe of catching up on the news as you lay in bed and try and fall asleep then we shouldn't be surprised that our hearts struggle to delight in God's word.

You know we're feeding them primarily candy all day every day and then we're shocked that we have no desire for green beans and broccoli. When we think about God's word and we talk about the Christian life sometimes we shy away from words like discipline.

You know it sounds a little bit like work right? Maybe it sounds suspiciously like something that you might do to get right with God. Maybe it sounds like legalism. Maybe that's a thought that you've had as I've been talking.

[27 : 56] So is this legalism? This is a quote from a book called Disciplines of a God.