

The Harvester



Preparing Souls

To Serve The Lord



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Psalm 119—Praise God for His Word!

By Brian R. Kenyon

With its 176 verses, Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. Like Psalms 37, 111, and 112, Psalm 119 is an acrostic, consisting of twenty-two stanzas of eight verses each. The twenty-two stanzas correspond to the twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. This division can be seen in most English translations, which usually divide the stanzas with the consecutive Hebrew letters. Each verse in its respective stanza begins with the Hebrew letter of that section. One advantage to acrostics was that they made memorization easier.

God's Word Displayed

Although some see Psalm 119 as a long, repetitive, unstructured gathering of Biblical themes, a closer examination reveals a wonderful display of meaning. In addition to the acrostic nature of this psalm, which in itself is a literary masterpiece, there are three significant features of this psalm that give reason why God should be praised for His word.

First, the emphasis of the entire psalm is upon God's written "law," or *torah*. Eight synonyms for the word of God will be examined in the next section, but note here that God's *torah* does not refer to some mundane legalistic system. Rather, *torah* simply means "instruction," or "teaching." In fact, the verb form of *torah* is found in two verses, translated "Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes" (Ps. 119:33, KJV), and "I have not departed from thy judgments: for thou hast taught me" (Ps. 119:102). The emphasis on *torah* also links Psalm 119 with the Book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 1:5 cf. Ps. 78:1, 5, 7; 105:5, 7). Far from being rote ritual, *torah* in Psalm 119 comprises the wonderful words of instruction that will bring us closer to God.

Second, Psalm 119 signals a "shift from a temple-based religion to a torah-based religion" (Broyles 443). Through most of the Old Testament, the focus of Israel's religion was upon God's presence in the temple with its sacrifices, feasts, and rituals, yet in Psalm 119, there is not the explicit mention of these temple-based things. Instead, the focus is upon God's written word! Rather than "zeal of [for, NKJ] thine house" (Ps. 69:9), the psalmist here declares "zeal" for "thy words" (Ps. 119:139). This shift can also be illustrated by comparing two parallel inspired accounts of Israel's history. First Kings 8:25, which was written before the exile, tells God's chosen to "walk before me as thou [Solomon] hast walked before me" (1 Kgs. 8:25). "Before me" refers to Jehovah's presence at the temple, which Solomon is here dedicating (Broyles 443). Second Chronicles 6:16, however, which was written after the exile, is worded almost exactly the same, except it says to "walk in my law [*torah*]." The change from walking before the Lord at the temple to walking according God's written law is very significant, and is exactly what Psalm 119 reflects. The psalmist encourages meditation upon God's *torah* (Ps. 119:15, 23 cf. Deut. 6:6-8; 11:18; 30:14), as well as placing it in our heart (Ps. 119:11 cf. Deut. 6:6; 11:18; 30:14), which will preserve life (Ps. 119:50, 93 cf. Deut. 32:46-47).

Third, Psalm 119 displays devotion to the Lord. The psalmist desires God's law (Ps. 119:5, 20, 40, 131, 174); he is mindful of His instruction no matter the time of day or night (Ps. 119:147-148, 164); and he constantly refers to himself as "thy servant" (Ps. 119:17, 23, 38, 49, 65, 76, 84, 122, 124-125, 135, 140, 176). The psalmist's lifestyle being directed by "Thy word" also reflects his devotion (Ps.

119:105). True devotion to God cannot be separated from action. Does our life emphasize God's law by pursuing it? Let us follow the devotion displayed in Psalm 119!

God's Word Defined

As mentioned already, there are eight synonyms for the word of God used in Psalms 119. In almost every verse at least one of these synonyms occurs. They are here listed in order from the greatest number of occurrences to the least (adapted from VanGemeren 737-738).

First, "law" (*torah*, always singular, occurring twenty-five times) generally refers to any instructions flowing from God's revelation. More specifically, it is often used of the Torah of Moses as revealed in the Pentateuch. As general instruction revealed from God in writing, "law" is not only found in the wisdom literature, but also in Deuteronomy and the prophets (cf. Deut. 17:11; Ps. 78:1; Pr. 1:8; 3:1; Isa. 1:10; 8:16; Mal. 2:6). "Law" includes all that God has revealed for guiding our lives in righteousness.

Second, "word" (*dabar*, occurring twenty-four times) refers to any word that comes from the mouth of the Lord, whether it pertains to the Decalogue (Deut. 4:13), the Law of Moses (Deut. 4:2, 10), or the word revealed by one of the prophets. It is a very general designation for divine revelation.

Third, "judgments," sometimes translated "rules" (ESV) (*mispatim*, always plural, occurring twenty-three times), generally refer to legal decisions pertaining to courts of law. The "judgments" of God are those "case laws" He has rendered that formed the foundation for Israel's legal system. In Psalm 119, "judgments" are often explicitly given by God Himself, the supreme Judge.

Thus, the verdicts rendered by Him are authoritative and truly for the best interest of His people (cf. Ps. 119:7, 62, 106, 164).

Fourth, "statutes," occurring one time in the singular as "testimony" (*edut*, occurring twenty-three times) is derived from a

root meaning to "witness," or "testify." The Hebrew word "statutes" is translated "testimony" in the "ark of the testimony" (Ex. 25:22), and the "two tables of testimony" (Ex. 31:18). The "ark" and "tables [tablets, NKJ]" were symbols of covenant relationship with God (cf. Ps. 25:10; 132:12). Thus, keeping the Lord's "statutes" signifies loyalty to the covenant made with Israel (cf. Deut. 4:45; 6:17, 20; Ps. 99:7).

Fifth, "commandment(s)" (*miswah*, occurring twenty-two times) designates anything that the Lord, the covenant God of Israel, has ordered or commanded. As might be expected, God orders only what is in the best interest of His name and His people (cf. Ps. 119:86, 98, 151, 172).

Sixth, "decrees," or "righteous judgments" (*huqqin*, occurring twenty-one times) comes from a root that means to "engrave," or "inscribe." God has "inscribed" divine order in this world by His decrees, which He has made known in nature (Ps. 148:1-6), and among His covenant people (Deut. 4:1 cf. Ps. 50:16).

Seventh, "precepts" (*piqqudim*, occurring twenty-one times) denote the authority God has laid down to which He expects His people to respond. This Hebrew word occurs only in the Book of Psalms, and it is from a root that means to "visit," or "appoint." The word from which "precepts" is translated is related to "command" in that both of these words carry the idea of authority in determining the relationship between the speaker and the object of the precept or command. The Lord commanded precepts, and the psalmist is to respond by "keeping" them (Ps. 119:56, 63, 69, 100, 134, 168), by "loving" them (Ps. 119:159), by "choosing" them (Ps. 119:173), by "longing after" them (Ps. 119:40), by "seeking" them (Ps. 119:45, 94), by "meditating" on them (Ps. 119:15, 78), and by "getting understanding" from them (Ps. 119:104). In so doing, he will never "forget" (Ps. 119:93, 141), "forsake" (Ps. 119:87), or "stray" (Ps. 119:110) from the Lord who gave them!

Eighth, "word," as in "promise" (ESV) (*imrah*, occurring nineteen times), may denote anything God has spoken, commanded, or promised. Again, as might be expected, God's promises are conditioned upon our obedience to His word and only result in blessing to the faithful (Ps. 119:50, 116, 154).

Forms of these eight Hebrew words occur 178 times in the 176 verses of Psalm 119. Thus, it can truly be said that Psalm 119 praises God for His word!

God's Word De-stressed

Like many of the psalms, Psalm 119 is anonymous. Many would point to a post-exilic author. In fact, Smith says, "Coincidences between the language of the text and the history of Ezra's time hint that this great scribe may

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have been the writer" (410). While the author is not explicitly named, the text offers insight to his circumstances and the excellency of God's word in dealing with them.

First, the psalmist seems to be a young man, as indicated by his rhetorical question, "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word" (Ps. 119:9). His having "more understanding than all my teachers...[and] the ancients" suggest his young age as well (Ps. 119:99-100). How many young men would be kept from straying into the ditch if they, like the psalmist, would recognize, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105)?

Second, the psalmist is being persecuted. Generally, he states, "Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law" (Ps. 119:53). He also says that "they persecute me wrongfully" (Ps. 119:86). Specifically, he acknowledges, "The proud have forged a lie against me" (Ps. 119:69a), yet he admits, "I will keep thy precepts with my whole heart" (Ps. 119:69b). He also declares, "The bands [cords, NKJ] of the wicked have robbed [encircled, NAS] me" (Ps. 119:61a), which suggests he has been captured by his enemies. Yet he can say, "I have not forgotten thy law" (Ps. 119:61b). He notes, "My soul [life, NKJ] is continually in my hand" (Ps. 119:109a), which is a term for one who should realistically expect death (cf. Judg. 12:3). Again, though, he declares, "yet do I not forget thy law" (Ps. 119:109b). The source of his persecution seems to be hostile civil authorities, yet he still seeks comfort in God's word (Ps. 119:23, 161). Despite his persecution from civil authorities, the psalmist says, "I will speak of thy testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed" (Ps. 119:46)!

Third, the psalmist sees the value of the persecution he suffers. He plainly declares, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (Ps. 119:71), for "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word" (Ps. 119:67). We also must realize that persecution can make us better servants of God (cf. Mt. 5:10-12; 2 Tim. 3:12; Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 4:12-16). Let us also trust in the word of the Lord when we face severe trial!

Conclusion

Psalm 119 is truly one of the great chapters in the Bible. Unfortunately, some people deprive themselves of the riches that can be gleaned from an in depth study of this psalm. May we realize the praiseworthiness of God for His word, not only in the individual verses of this psalm, but in some of the general themes that run through it. May we, like this psalm exemplifies, long for the word of God, and realize that we live under a better covenant, revealed by God's written word. The excellencies of God's word not only offer salvation from sin when followed, but they also help us in time of distress. May we live our lives in full reliance upon God so as to "not forget thy commandments" (Ps. 119:176). 

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		Greek I (222) or III (271) (second year students)	Kenyon	3
Tuesday	8:30-12:00	Christian Evidences (224)	Stearnsman	3
	1:00-4:15	Logic (270)	Bauer	3
Wednesday	8:30-12:00	Church History (241)	Kenyon	3
	1:00-4:15	First and Second Corinthians (135)	Kenyon	3
Thursday	8:30-12:00	Revelation (259)	Stearnsman	3
	1:00-4:15	Computers and Churches (287)	Wheeler	3
Friday	8:30-12:00	Preacher and His Work I (107)	Wheeler	3
	1:00-4:15	Pentateuch (164)	Elledge	3

Extension Classes				
Thursday	6:00-8:30	First and Second Corinthians (135) (Orange Street church of Christ, Auburndale)	Bauer	2.5
	7:00-9:30	Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon (136) (Wesconnett church of Christ, Jacksonville)	Scaggs	2.5

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