

# An Introduction to the Psalms

## Lecture #5 – The Key to Everything

There is one psalm that is completely different from all the others (and from all the rest of the Bible). Other passages employ literary devices, but none so thoroughly and rigorously as Psalm 119. (We have noticed, for instance, #136 in which the response in every verse is “for his steadfast love endures forever.”) 119 is the longest psalm, by far – 176 verses. It comes between the two subsections we discussed last time: The (Egyptian) Hallel (113-118) recited/sung/chanted especially during the three great festivals, particularly Tabernacles, and The Great Hallel (the Songs of Ascent, 120-136). So, its *placement* seems to be very deliberate, as if to say *praise pivots on the theme of this psalm*.

In essence: *there is a key to success in the spiritual life*. Do this one thing and you will: find blessing, develop purity, be kept from sin, experience renewal/revival, understand the ways of God, find strength in the midst of sorrow, be delivered from shame, have an answer to ridicule, walk in liberty, be a source of joy to those who love and fear God, put the godless to shame, develop more understanding than all your teachers....

It is *not*: prayer, worship, exercising faith, tithing, witnessing, reading the Bible, fasting, trusting, obeying (though it could be argued that it involves all of these things). It is not even becoming a member of LOWC!

It is...Meditating – specifically mentioned 8x (in verses 15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, and 148) and implied throughout in such phrases as “having my eyes fixed on all your commandments” (v. 6) and “I treasure your word in my heart” (v. 11 – note: the older translation: “I have hidden your word in my heart”), and “I delight in your decrees...I delight in your statutes” (v. 14, 16)

Of course, there is no point in meditating/contemplating/keeping your eye upon/delighting in God’s word/commandments/precepts/statutes/ordinances – unless we are going to *do* them! But the emphasis in Psalm 119 is upon meditation/contemplation *so that* obedience will be complete.

We don’t know who wrote this psalm or when it was written. Scholarly consensus: probably around the time of Ezra (c. 450 B.C.). Ezra was famous for “rediscovering” the law of God, reading the Holiness Code in public, and sending away all the foreign wives Jewish men had taken – so, thematically that may be correct.

You may notice that in most translations (notably *not* in the Living Bible), the psalm is composed of 22 strophes/stanzas, each having 8 lines/verses. What you will not notice (unless you can read it in Hebrew) is that each line in a given stanza begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and that the stanzas themselves form an acrostic of the entire alphabet. (Each line of the 1<sup>st</sup> stanza begins with Aleph, each line of the 2<sup>nd</sup> begins with Beth, 3<sup>rd</sup> – Gimel, 4<sup>th</sup> -Daleth,

He, Vau, Zain...) This is an extremely artful structure, probably done to help in memorization/recollection (“I have hidden your word in my heart”).

So, *the very thing the psalm enjoins us to do* – meditate and reflect on the word of God – *the structure of the psalm facilitates* (at least to some extent).

Parallelism – e.g., vs. 11-16 – “I treasure your word” (“I have hidden it in my heart”), “I delight in the way of your decrees,” “I will meditate on your precepts,” “I will fix my eyes on your ways,” “I will delight in your statutes,” “I will not forget your word.”

Note: Biblical Meditation is radically different from Eastern (or “Transcendental”) Meditation. Its purpose to *empty* the mind, shut down all conscious thinking. Danger! the Enemy loves nothing more! Biblical Meditation is *filling* the mind with the truths/promises/ways/testimonies/precepts/statutes/laws/decrees/great saving deeds/attributes of God, and especially, his commandments. (At least 10 synonyms for his laws.)

Astonishing – when so much of our culture finds law abhorrent...

- even many in the Church (“we’re not under law; we’re under grace”),
- even portions of the NT - “all who rely on the law are under a curse” (Galatians 3:10), “Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law?” (Galatians 4:21), “Now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves, not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit” (Romans 7:6)

...here is someone saying, “I delight in your laws; I love them, I pant for them.”

Are Paul and the Psalmist reading the same book? Yes! But they are reading it in opposite ways. Paul read it as a *prescription* of what I must do to be saved (and the problem is that I can’t do it), so it condemns me. The Psalmist read it as a *description* of what the Lord enables me to do by his Spirit. Cf. the Reformers’ “three uses of the law”: to drive us to Christ, to order society, to inform the conscience of the faithful.

Meditation from the same root as rumination (from Latin, *ruminare*: “to chew”). Ruminants are cud-chewing mammals. They swallow what they have eaten but bring it up again to chew until they have gotten every particle of nourishment from it.

We are to do exactly that with the word of God. Psalm 119 demonstrates what it recommends.

“Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” the word of God. Commit it to memory so you can “bring it up again” and chew on it. “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15, KJV)

Don't make a resolution (especially one that builds failure into your agenda. Develop a habit. 10 – 15 minutes a day. Read with a notebook and pen. 3 x 5 cards. Memorize. Chew on it.

What does it *say*? (Observation) What does it *mean*? (Interpretation) What does it mean *to me*? (Application) Is there a Promise to claim, Command to obey, Pattern to follow, Example to emulate, Sin to forsake, Condition to fulfill, Truth to appreciate?