

May 3

Psalm 119

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter of the longest Book in God's Word. The subject of Psalm 119 is, of course, the Word of God, and it is a magnificent song. Its impact on the saints of Christ's church through the ages has been immense.

Psalm 119 is an acrostic. Each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, starting with Aleph, the first letter and moving right on through the whole Hebrew alphabet. The reason for writing the Psalm in this fashion is both obvious and startling! It is constructed in this way so that it will be easier for God's people to memorize it. The longest chapter in the Bible was clearly meant to be memorized! *"Thy word," it says, "I have hid in my heart that I might not sin against you."*

The discipline of memorizing, and then meditating upon, God's Word, is a dying one in the church. We are, we believe, too busy. The job is too hard. There are so many other things to be remembered. May I challenge you to an experiment? In your reading this week, identify one or two key verses that really speak to you. Commit them to memory. Then, as you go about your work, meditate upon those words. Build them into your life and see what will happen. If you choose to continue this discipline, I do not believe that you will ever regret it.

The passage that you read today, is at the very heart of the Psalms. Everything revolves around, and centers upon, the Word of God. It is the foundation upon which the life of God's people is built. It is the source of direction, comfort, peace, joy, strength, freedom, hope, security, purity and power.

Did you take note of all the different ways the Scripture is designated in this Psalm? It is the "law" of the Lord. We must never forget that God's Word is law - the law that governs heaven and earth and all of creation. Have you ever thought about the Bible that way? It is also the "statutes, the precepts, the decrees and the commands of God." It is His word, it is His way and it is His truth. All of these different expressions convey to us something of the richness that is found in Scripture. We are told to keep the statutes, to meditate on the precepts, to observe and learn the decrees, to obey the commands, to delight in the Word, to walk in the Way, to set our hearts upon the Law -- to choose the Truth.

The second stanza of the song captures my attention every single time I read it. It contains two of the three key verses in the first half of the Psalm that seem to me to be the most important. Verse 9 asks and answers a very pertinent question - *"How can a young man keep his way pure?"* The answer? *"By living according to Your Word."* Verse 11 is the second key verse of Psalm 119 - *"I have hidden your Word in my heart that I might not sin against you."* The Psalmist also alerts us to the fact that he rejoices in following God's statutes and delights in His decrees. In this paragraph there are three easily recognizable characteristics of the man or woman whose life is truly centered on the Word of God. The person whose life is truly focused on God's Word: learns it, lives it and loves it.

You are taking a serious step toward learning God's Word by reading your Bible and listening to these recordings everyday. Exposing yourself to God's Word is an important first step toward learning it. But just reading and listening is apparently not quite all that God has in mind for you. The Psalm says to hide it in our hearts and to meditate upon it - to memorize it and to mull over it. Maybe memorization does come hard for you - perhaps there's another way. Very significant portions of God's Word have now been set to music in worship songs. If straight memory work is hard, perhaps you should listen to some of those songs and learn them. Singing the Word is a great way to learn the Word. Read it on the page, then put it between your ears - then think about it hard and a lot. That's what it means when it says meditate - work out its implications, ask what it teaches about God, about man, about Christ and about life. Every time you read a passage you should be thinking hard. Ask yourself, "Does this have something new to teach me about God, man or theology?" Look for examples to follow or mistakes to avoid. See if there is a promise to claim or a command to obey, or a sin to repent of. Reading the Word is a great start, but it is only a start. Learning the Word will involve more than just reading it. When we have learned the Word, we have an additional obligation -- we have to then live the Word. If we learn it with our heads and refuse to use it in our lives, we invite the discipline and judgment of our heavenly Father.

Finally, in the second paragraph, there is another characteristic we can note. The man or woman whose life is truly focused upon the Word of God will soon enough come to love the Word. When you learn and live it, you will inevitably begin to love it.

To learn, to live and to love the Word of God: these are the qualities of the bibliocentric life. In verse 89-176, there is another characteristic that emerges - a deep sense of distress that is caused when the follower of the Word sees the law of God neglected and abused.

The Old Testament prophets characteristically are found in sackcloth and ashes, not only because of the impending judgments that are about to fall upon their people, but just as much, because the honor of God is being challenged and His Word is being disregarded. Jesus, of course, is the greatest of examples in this regard. He was "*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*" because the honor of His Father was being impugned, and the Word of God dishonored. When He said, "*Blessed are they that mourn*," I believe He was not only viewing the phenomenon of repentance, in which true sorrow for our sins is followed by the comfort of the Holy Spirit, but also the kind of righteous sorrow that comes to spiritually sensitive hearts, making them grieve deeply, as God's people view the sin and despair of the world around them.

I am often troubled by the lack of sensitivity to sin that I find in my life. The things I see in my world, read about in my newspaper or watch on the nightly news ought to break my heart and drive me to my knees. But I've been desensitized by the horrors of sin in my world to the point at which I am often blind to the devastation and trouble that it causes. The Word of God has the ability to "re-sensitize" me and to open my eyes once again to the reality of evil. "*Streams of tears flow from my eyes*," writes the

Psalmist, *"for your law is not obeyed."* The godly person learns, lives and loves the Word of God, and because of that he mourns the evil of the world.

In the very first stanza of the Psalm, we are told that loving God's Word will keep us from being put to shame. In verse 165, right at the end of the Psalm, it tells us that great peace comes to those who love God's law. In between verse 6 and verse 165, the Psalmist lists "use" after "use" after "use" of the Word of God. Depending on how we categorize related assertions, like those of verses 98 and 99, which say, *"the Word of God makes us wiser than our enemies and teachers,"* and verse 130, which says *"it brings understanding to the simple,"* there are between 12 and 18 different functions of the Word noted in this great chapter. Let me list some of the things God's Word can do for us:

- Keeps us from shame
- God's Word keeps us pure
- Keeps me from sin
- Brings joy and delight
- Removes scorn and contempt
- Counsels me; it directs me
- Renews my life
- Strengthens me
- The Word of God sets my heart free
- Provides the answers to the one who taunts me
- Gives hope
- God's Word comforts me
- The Bible preserves me
- Makes me wiser than my enemies, my teachers
- Brings solace in trouble
- Brings peace

Now, these are just some of the things that the Word of God can do for us. How could we possibly ignore it? Why would we ever want to do so?

The Psalmist is overflowing with declarations about what God's Word will do for us, and it is clear that He really does love God's awesome law and His 'sweet' promises. In numerous places, he affirms that God's law is true, right, trustworthy and good. The security that he feels is in part, at least, rooted in the understanding of verse 89: *"Your word, Oh Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens."*