May 24/25, 2014

Things About The Bible You Should Know: Again

Psalm 119

2014 Summer in Psalms Series

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So I was just wondering. Did you open the Book this week...did you open *The Book* this week? And whether you did or you didn't, does it matter? Well, that's actually what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 1. This weekend we begin our summer Psalms series. It's the nine psalms that you chose. We're going to start with the least requested all the way up to the most requested, and of course, we're going to keep that a big secret. The psalm requested for this weekend was actually not Psalm 1 but Psalm 119, and we'll get there, but I want to start with Psalm 1 because Psalm 1 basically creates the framework in order to make sense of the other 149 psalms, so let's start here and then we'll move on to Psalm 119. Verse 1:

> **How blessed is the man…** (*NASB, Psalm 1:1a)

The word **blessed** there is a Hebrew word that means *happy*, not happy in kind of a silly, giddy sense but happy in the sense of that which is deep and rich and satisfying. I would suggest to you it's the idea of everything your soul longs for. It's everything that everyone is searching for. How does that happen? Well, he's going to tell us in Psalm 1.

> **How blessed is the man who** (first of all) **does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,**
> **Nor stand in the path of sinners,**
> **Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!** (Vs. 1)

There is definitely a progression in verse 1 from walking to standing to sitting to listening to counsel to test driving the counsel to actually buying into the lifestyle. The idea is that we listen to the voices. We decide to take the counsel of the wicked for a test drive, and we end up buying into the lifestyle so much that we're actually making fun of people who are on the other path. From Genesis 3 on through the rest of the Bible, there is this consistent imagery of the idea of two paths. There is the path that is defined by my desire to be my own god, so I'll decide for myself what's true and false, what's right or wrong, and I will guide myself through life. It's the idea that nobody's going to tell me what to do. I'm going to live my life my way. The other path would be defined by those who surrender to God as God and determine that God is the author of life, that God's way is the way that brings life to my soul—two different paths.

How do I end up on the first path? It isn't an overnight decision. It's a gradual process. I'm walking; I'm standing; I'm sitting; I'm listening; I'm test driving; I'm buying in. That's the idea of verse 1. "Happy is the person who does not buy in." What's the alternative? Verse 2:

> **But his delight is in the law of the LORD,**
> **And in His law he meditates day and night.**

He delights **in the law of the LORD.** The Hebrew word that's translated **law of the LORD** is an interesting word. It basically means a spear or a javelin that penetrates the bull's eye of a target, so it's basically capturing the idea that the word of God penetrates deep into our hearts. Over the years I've found it to be true that there are two categories of people. There are people that love this Book,

and there are people that seem to hate this Book, and it comes down to the fact that the Book enlightens for those who want to travel God's path, and the Book exposes those who want to travel their own path. People that want to go their own way, that want to live in darkness, don't want their ways exposed to the light, avoid this Book because it's a book that penetrates deep into the heart.

It says...**in His law he meditates day and night**. That word *meditates* is an interesting word. Maybe when you hear the word meditate, you kind of think this Eastern mysticism where you kind of empty your mind of everything and drift off into who knows where. The biblical idea of meditation would be the exact opposite of that. It is the idea of, rather than emptying our minds, we actually fill our minds with the truth of God, and we wrestle with it. The word was used to describe a cow chewing its cud, the idea that we just keep chewing it over and over and over again.

It's used in the book of Isaiah to refer to a lion growling over a piece of meat, kind of the idea of growling and pawing over this piece of meat, just working it over in order to consume it. The Hebrew word is *hagah*, and it's an onomatopoeia, meaning it sounds like what it is. Now years ago when I explained this, I actually demonstrated how if you say the word over and over again it sounds like growling. After that weekend my girls encouraged me not to do that again (laughter), so for their emotional health, I'm not going to demonstrate the word, but feel free later today to try it out for yourselves. It's the word *hagah*. Say it multiple times in a row. Trust me. It sounds like you're growling.

So verses 1 and 2 are basically creating this idea of two different paths and what determines which path you will travel is based on who it is you listen to. If you're going to take counsel from the wicked, counsel from the world, you're going to buy into the voices of the culture, you're going to travel one path. If you choose to listen to the voice of God, you're going to travel a different path. It is not an insignificant question to ask, "Which path are you traveling?" because the end of the two paths is dramatically different. Jesus said it best. "There is a wide path, and it's the path that most people will travel, but the end of that path is destruction." (Matthew 7:13). Proverbs says, "There is a way that seems right, but the end is destruction." (Proverbs 14:12).

The alternative is the path that Jesus said is the narrower path. It's the path that fewer will travel, but it is the path that brings life. It is the path that delivers what my soul is longing for, so which path you're traveling on is not an insignificant question. The results are defined in verses 3 and 4. Those who **delight in the law of the LORD and meditate on it day and night**…

> **He will be like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water,**
> **Which yields its fruit in its season,**
> **And its leaf does not wither;**
> **And in whatever he does, he prospers.** (Vs. 3)

Basically what the psalmist is describing are water canals in the ancient Near East, so imagine that the psalmist perhaps is sitting on the side of a hill writing out the psalm and trying to figure out, "How do I describe the difference in the two paths?" And he looks out over the landscape. The landscape of the ancient Near East would have been dry, brown, barren with the exception of these manmade water canals, and next to these water canals they would plant trees, and the grass and the trees next to these canals would be deeply rooted, would be green and flourishing and would produce fruit. So if you imagine looking out over the landscape, seeing mostly brown but these strips of green, lush, productive trees, and he is saying the one who **delights in the law of the**

LORD, it's like that. The pathway is green and it's flourishing and it's bearing fruit. The alternative is verse 4.

> **The wicked are not so,**
> **But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.**

Chaff would be that which is dried up and worthless and just blowing in the wind. Perhaps here in the Midwest we would think in terms of a tumbleweed, and perhaps he's sitting on the side of the hill and looks at the green, lush strips next to the canal, and he compares that in a sense to a tumbleweed that's blowing past, and it's the idea that the difference is whether it's dry and worthless and blowing away, or it's green and lush and productive.

So think of it this way: *You only get one life.* That's a truth that often sobers me up. I don't get a do-over. I don't get a second shot at this. So when you get to the end of your story and look back, which would you prefer? Would you prefer the sum total of your life to be defined by a tumbleweed blowing past, accounting for nothing, or a rich, fruitful tree bearing fruit that matters for eternity? If your decision is to travel your own path, be your own god, do your own thing, and you say, "I really don't care if I get to the end of my life and the sum total of my life is the chaff that blows away in the wind," then I'm going to guess you could care less what's in *The Book*. You're just not going to read it. You don't care.

But if you are sincere in your desire to live a life for the things that matter, you say, "I really want my life to travel God's path; I want it to be that fruitful tree that at the end of my life I will know I invested in the things that matter," then the 149 psalms to follow should matter deeply to you. That is the purpose of Psalm 1 in the 150 psalms. It's to say, "If this matters, read on. If it doesn't, you might as well take a nap."

So with that in mind, I want to take us to Psalm 119, which is the psalm that was requested for today, and it actually is very similar to Psalm 1. Now this is a very difficult psalm to cover in thirty-five minutes. Maybe if you were among those who requested this psalm, we could chat afterwards. It's a great psalm that's very hard to deal with in a limited amount of time.

Let me tell you a couple things about the psalm. The psalm is made up of twenty-two paragraphs. Each of those paragraphs has eight stanzas or, in our Bible, would translate into eight verses. Each of those verses starts with the same Hebrew letter, so if you look at the paragraphs, over those paragraphs you probably see some sort of a word that's not familiar to you. Those are the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, so in English it would be A, B, C, D. So in the first paragraph, every stanza starts with the letter A, second paragraph every stanza starts with the letter B, only, of course, it would be the Hebrew alphabet, and that's how the entire psalm is organized. It's a beautiful piece of poetic literature, but the problem is, once it's translated into English, all that is lost. Then it just seems like kind of a confusing, rambling piece of poetry.

It's 176 verses long. Now to put that in some perspective, last year we went through the entire book of Galatians. The entire book of Galatians combined is 149 verses, so Psalm 119 is longer by probably a chapter and a half than the entire book of Galatians, so good luck getting through this one in the next fifteen minutes. Actually what I'm going to do is this: I am going to give you 22 reasons why this Book matters, and I'm going to do that by cherry-picking one verse from each of the 22 paragraphs. Obviously there won't be much time to comment, but here we go. Verse 1:

How blessed are those whose way is blameless,
Who walk in the law of the LORD. (Ps. 119:1)

The word **blessed** there is the same word from Psalm 1. How happy, deeply happy, joyful, deeply rich, satisfyingly joyful is the one who spends time in *The Book*. I would suggest to you what everybody's looking for is that which will deeply satisfy. If you're serious about that, you're going to find it in *The Book*. Next, Verse 9:

How can a young man keep his way pure?
By keeping *it* according to Your word.
With all my heart I have sought You;
Do not let me wander from Your commandments.
Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You. (Vs. 9-11)

If you're serious about walking the path of life in a very confusing world, how do you make sure you stay on the path and don't wander off? How do you remain free from sin? Answer: Read *The Book*. **Thy word have I treasured in my heart in order that I might not sin against God**, in order that I might not wander off the path. Sin will keep you from *this Book,* or *this Book* will keep you from sin. It's up to you. Our friends at the Bible Engagement Center say that it's four times a week that makes the significant difference in how a Christian lives his or her life, so that's a good goal to think about. If you come on the weekends, this is one. Three more times during the week to engage *this Book* in a meaningful way will make a significant difference in your life. Next one, verse 21:

You rebuke the arrogant, the cursed,
Who wander from Your commandments. (Vs. 21)

Those who wander away are those that aren't in *The Book*, and why is it that we're not in *The Book*? Answer: verse 21. It's *not* because we're *too* busy. I wish we would just put that tired old line to bed. We're all busy. Fine! But it's not because we're too busy. It is because we're arrogant. If you did not open up *this Book* this week, it's simply because you are convinced, "I don't need to. I've got this thing wired. I know how to live the Christian life. I know how to travel the path. I know how to do life. I don't need any help. I didn't open up *The Book* this week because I didn't think I needed to open up *The Book*." It is based not on our being too busy. It's based on our arrogance and our belief, "I can do it myself." Verse 28:

My soul weeps because of grief;
Strengthen me according to Your word.

What do you do when your soul weeps because of grief? What about those times in life when the bottom falls out, those times when you're feeling the pain of life and your soul is weeping? Where do you find strength to go on? Answer: It's in *The Book*. In those moments when your soul is weeping and you need strength, you're going to find strength if you open up *The Book* and read it. Next one, verse 37:

Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity,
And revive me in Your ways.

The idea of **vanity** is the idea of *emptiness*. It's the idea of *worthlessness*. It would be (Psalm 1) the chaff that blows in the wind. In other words, how do I make sure I don't get to the end of my life and realize I have given my life to the things that ultimately don't matter? Total waste? What the psalmist is saying is he wants to turn his eyes away from that which is vanity and to live for the things that matter. How do you do that on a consistent basis? Answer: Read *The Book*. I would suggest to you that the voices of the culture are *so* compelling and they are *so* strong to convince you to live for the things of this world, that without consistent intake of *The Book*, you're just *not* going to make it. You will not ultimately live for the things that matter. Next one, verse 45:

And I will walk at liberty,
For I seek Your precepts.

The word **liberty** means *freedom*. Hebrew literally means *wide open spaces.* How do I live my life in freedom? How do I live my life in freedom rather than bondage? Answer: Read *The Book.* As a matter of fact, I think it's helpful to understand. *This Book* is not filled with common sense. It is filled with very uncommon sense. What's in *This Book* is not intuitive. What's in *This Book* is counterintuitive. It's very important to understand that. Your default mode which is often common sense, your default mode which is intuition is often what leads you down a path of destruction.

Think of it this way: Last year we went through the book of Galatians and found out it is the truth that sets you free. It is the truth that sets you free from condemnation. It's the truth that sets you free from shame and guilt. It's the truth that sets you free to live, but what we found in the book of Galatians is the truth is not common sense. It's not intuitive. It is counterintuitive. There is not a single person in this room, based on your own intuitive senses, would have come up with the truth that sets you free that is presented in the book of Galatians. If you're serious about wanting to experience freedom, then it's the truth that sets you free, and you've got to read *The Book* in order to know the truth. Next one, verse 55:

O LORD, I remember Your name in the night,
And keep Your law.

The idea of **the night** is the idea of *despair*, the idea of *depression*, the idea of feeling like I'm in this night season, and it feels like the sun is never going to come up again, this idea that the world feels dark to me, and it feels like the sun will never come up in the morning. What do you do when you find yourself in that season of life, what some have referred to as the dark night of the soul? The answer is: I remember God's **name**. The idea of **name** is to describe everything that God is. "God, I remember who You are. I remember what You've promised. I remember the hope of the gospel." There are times in life where all you can do with all of the faith you have is just cling to God for all you're worth. But you will only do that if you know God, and you can only know God if you read *His Book*. In that moment of need, what are you going to do? Read *The Book*. Verse 59:

I considered my ways
And turned my feet to Your testimonies.

This is talking about the idea of an intersection, a crossroads, and I'm wresting with whether I'm going to go my way or God's way. Life is defined by a series of crossroads, where in those moments I decide, "Am I going to go my way or God's way?" And when it's all said and done, what you decide in those moments will largely define your experience in life. That's what the psalmist is

saying is, "At that crossroad I thought about my way, but because I was in *The Book*, I decided to go God's way," and the difference would be dramatic. Next one, verse 72:

The law of Your mouth if better to me
Than thousands of gold and silver *pieces*.

This is imagery, a message that's offered consistently through the Old Testament and on into the New Testament—that God's word, God's truth is worth more than silver and gold, and every time I read that, I find myself asking, "Do I believe that, and does my lifestyle reflect that I believe that?" It's a legitimate question to ask yourself. This past week, were you more passionate about silver and gold, or were you more passionate about Jesus? If you were more passionate about Jesus, you would be in *The Book*. So which really mattered to you more this week?

We have this nasty habit of excusing everything under the umbrella, "I'm too busy." But what if this morning I said to you, "I'm going to give you thirty days to learn all you can learn from Psalm 119 and, at the end of those thirty days, I'm going to give you a quiz, and if you get 90% or better on the quiz, I will give you $100,000." Suddenly in our busy lifestyle, we have time for *The Book*. What's worth more to you—God's truth or silver and gold? It will highly determine how much time you spend in *The Book*. Next one, verse 83:

Though I have become like a wineskin in the smoke,
I do not forget Your statutes.

Now I picked this one just because I love the imagery—the idea of a wineskin sitting close to a fire. Over time it becomes hard; it becomes smoky; it becomes cracked; it becomes brittle. It's a graphic imagery to say, "Hey, do you ever feel that way? Are there ever times in life when you feel like, 'I'm kind of drying out. I think I'm starting to crack. I think I feel brittle.' All of a sudden, I feel very vulnerable." What do you do? What do you do in those moments of life? Answer: Read *The Book*. The next one, verse 89:

Forever, O LORD,
Your word is settled in heaven.

It would be my opinion that the postmodern experiment is coming to an end. I believe the sun is setting on postmodernism, and most would say it has been a deeply dissatisfying and hurtful philosophy. One of the marks of postmodernism is relativism, that there is no absolute truth. There's nothing nailed down. Everything's up for grabs, which frankly is a miserable way to live. You never know when the ground under your feet is going to collapse, and you have a whole generation that was raised under this that is saying, "I don't want to live that way. I want something that's anchored. I want something that's nailed down. I want something more to life than that."

One of the criticisms that people would offer concerning the Bible is: it's an ancient book that was written thousands of years ago to which I would say, "Exactly...exactly! It's not the latest trend. It's not the latest philosophy. It is ancient truth that has stood the test of time for thousands of years. It is rooted. It is anchored. It is true, and it will be true forever. If you want to anchor your soul to something that will be true forever, read *The Book*. Next one, verse 100:

I understand more than the aged,
Because I have observed Your precepts.

Those of us that are like me—middle-aged, on up—wrestle with this truth. It's only after you've lived so much life that you finally start to get it, and it's a very frustrating thing that you can't go back and do it over. This is one of the frustrations of parenting. About the time your last child is walking out the door, there's something inside of you that says, "I finally get it!" And that's why it's so helpful for the older generation to talk to the younger generation and to help them with that. But what if it were possible to actually be wiser than the aged? What if at age twenty you could live with more skill than somebody that's seventy? The text just said you can do that if you just read *The Book.*

Sometimes I hear people describe someone else as someone, "who just always has to learn things the hard way". No one has to learn the hard way. That is not a personality type. That is arrogance. Nobody has to live that way. There is a better option. Read *The Book*. Next one, 105:

> **Your word is a lamp to my feet**
> **And a light to my path.**

In the ancient world, without all the conveniences of a modern society, darkness was really dark. There was very little that could be done, and you kind of stumbled your way along. If you had the option of living in the light with all that that offers or stumbling around in the darkness, why would you choose the darkness? If you want a light, it's right here. **Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.** Verse 114:

> **You are my hiding place and my shield...**

If you read the broader context, the psalmist is talking about being falsely accused, about people saying things about him that aren't true and attacking him and finding his refuge, his protector, his shield in the person of God. But you will never know God as a refuge if you don't know God. I would say for me personally as a pastor who, because of my role, has settled the fact that I will live a way of life with people falsely accusing and misrepresenting me on a regular basis. That is just my life. And I have settled the fact that, at the end of the day, there is only one opinion that matters, and that is the opinion of God. So I find my safety, I find my refuge in God, and God ultimately knows the truth. Without God as a refuge, where do you go when people are unfairly criticizing and accusing you? Verse 121:

> **I have done justice and righteousness...**

There's a lot of talk today about **justice**. It's a very good thing, but I would suggest to you that a lot of the justice today is rather selective justice, and a lot of it comes with a lot of hypocrisy. If you're serious about justice, if you're serious about social justice, if you're serious about doing justice, the only way you'll get it right is you've got to read *The Book* because it's a rather complicated discussion. Verse 136:

> **My eyes shed streams of water,** (Why?)
> **Because they do not keep Your law.**

What is the consequence of ignoring *This Book,* of deciding to just wing it on your own? Answer: **My eyes shed streams of water.** If you'd like to avoid that, read *The Book*. It doesn't have to be that way. Verse 140:

Your word is very pure,
Therefore Your servant loves it.

The idea of **pure** carries the idea of *not being contaminated*, the idea that it is true and *completely* true. It's not contaminated with a lot of falsehoods. One of the things that I think is a challenge in the day in which we live is to figure out who's telling the truth? The internet doesn't tell the truth. The media doesn't tell the truth. The history channel and science channel don't necessarily tell the truth. The textbooks don't tell the truth anymore. The nightly news anchors don't tell the truth. The newspaper doesn't tell the truth. The magazines don't tell the truth. The politicians don't tell the truth. Frankly churches and preachers don't tell the truth. Who is telling the truth? The answer is *The Book* tells the truth. If you're serious about truth, go to *The Book*. It's completely uncontaminated of lies. It's pure truth. Verse 151:

You are near, O LORD,
And all Your commandments are truth.

If you want to experience the nearness of God through the ups and downs in life, you have to know God, and to know God you have to read *His Book*, His love letter. Verse 160:

The sum of Your word is truth,
And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting.

We talked about this. The sum total of everything God has to say is true. You can believe it. You can base your life on it. Verse 165:

Those who love Your law have great peace...

Would you like to experience deep, lasting peace in the midst of a confusing, difficult culture? Read *The Book*. Verse 176:

I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant,
For I do not forget Your commandments.

What do you do if, *like a lost sheep, you have gone astray*? How do you find your way back? Read *The Book*. It is the roadmap back.

All the way back to 1979, Patty and I were dating. I lived in Chicago; Patty lived in Montana. Before internet, email, and all this other nonsense, *(laughter)* you actually had to write a letter, throw it in the mail, wait a couple days, and someone would get it. I remember when I was in Chicago, and Patty would send letters—love letters—and I remember what an incredible burden it was to get one. I remember going to the mailbox day after day and thinking, "You've got to be *kidding* me, woman! Another one of those letters! This is such a *burden*! What a duty. I have to read another one because she's bound to ask me, 'Did you read it?'" Day after day, what a drag! It wasn't like that at all. As a matter of fact, day after day I would go to the mailbox hoping I had another letter. It was the highlight of the day. Often I would just wait until some point during the day I could just sit and relax and savor the moment and read it and reread it and reread it several times.

So here it is. The God of the universe has sent you a love letter. Is it a burden? Is it an obligation? Is it a duty? Is it something you crank out hoping to gain some favors from God? Shouldn't it be the

highlight of the day when I read God's love letter to me? Now I know what some of you are thinking. "You know, I appreciate what you're saying, but *This Book* is *really* complicated, and it's *really* confusing." I get that. I get that, but we can help.

Every year we offer a class—I teach the class. It's called the *Foundations* class. September to April on Wednesday nights we'll teach you about the Bible, how it's put together, how to understand it, how to study it. We'll help you. We also on Wednesday nights offer what's called the *Workman* class. It's a class that is totally devoted to one thing: how to open up this book and rightly interpret it. That one starts in September and is eighteen weeks long. If you're serious about saying, "I'd like to be able to open *The Book* and understand it," fine, we'll help you!

One other tool that you may find helpful is we're recommending a book. It's called *Taking God at His Word.* This is kind of some good summer reading. We bought a hundred copies. I think there's only about forty left, so it will be a free-for-all—ten bucks a piece, which is just our cost. If you'd like to renew your commitment to the reliability of the Bible, if you'd like to regain your confidence that the Bible is indeed true, but maybe most importantly, if you'd like to just fall in love with the Bible once again, this is a very helpful book. It's very easy to get. It's called *Taking God at His Word*. If we run out, you can get it about anyplace. I would highly recommend it.

Happy, deeply satisfied, fulfilled is the person who delights himself/herself in the law of the Lord, and in it he or she meditates day and night.

Our Father, we're thankful for Your word and that it's true, that it gives us a lamp and a light to navigate through the darkness. Lord, help us to understand that the God of the universe has given us a love letter that breathes life into our soul if we'll take the time to open it up and to read it. Lord, my prayer is that we would be people of The Book, and our lives would reflect the truth. In Jesus' name, amen.

Psalm 119:89-105:

Lamedh.
Forever, O LORD,
Your word is settled in heaven.
Your faithfulness *continues* throughout all generations;
You established the earth, and it stands.
They stand this day according to Your ordinances,
For all things are Your servants.
If Your law had not been my delight,
Then I would have perished in my affliction.
I will never forget Your precepts,
For by them You have revived me.
I am Yours, save me;
For I have sought Your precepts.
The wicked wait for me to destroy me;

I shall diligently consider Your testimonies.
I have seen a limit to all perfection;
Your commandment is exceedingly broad.

Mem.
O how I love Your law!
It is my meditation all the day.
Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies,
For they are ever mine.
I have more insight than all my teachers,
For Your testimonies are my meditation.
I understand more than the aged,
Because I have observed your precepts.
I have restrained my feet from every evil way,
That I may keep Your word.
I have not turned aside from your ordinances,
For You Yourself have taught me.
How sweet are Your words to my taste!
***Yes, sweeter* than honey to my mouth!**
From Your precepts I get understanding;
Therefore I hate every false way.

Nun.
Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path. (Ps. 119:89-105)

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