

God's Word: A Lifeline in Troubled Times (Part 1)

Psalm 119 is fascinating. We can list some interesting facts about it that are intriguing. It has 22 sections of 8 verses per section. It is an acrostic poem. That is, each section matches with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet. In each section every line begins with its corresponding letter. This means the author wanted to make this exceedingly long psalm easier to memorize. The psalm obviously focuses on God's Word, repeatedly using 8 synonyms for the word of God (most regularly translated as law, testimony, precepts, statutes, commandments, rules, word, promises). Five of the sections contain all 8 synonyms. Amazingly 172 out of 176 verses use at least one of these synonyms (and of the other 4, it can be argued that less common synonyms are used). With all of this, we readily recognize the "wisdom" nature of this psalm. So we might quickly lump this in as a didactic psalm (which means instructive or teaching, as opposed to a "praise psalm" or a "lament psalm"). It seems to be just like **Psalm 19**, only longer. The psalmist seems to be simply telling us how amazing God's Word is, beating us over the head with all the things it is good for and how much we need to be in it.

However, if we stop our assessment there, we will actually miss the true value of **Psalm 119** and of the Word of God. While the psalm clearly has "wisdom" and "didactic" aspects to it, I think it is also resoundingly a lament psalm. It stands in line with Psalms such as **Psalm 10, 22, 42, 88** and others as it complains and laments that the psalmist is undergoing duress that God hasn't done anything about yet as His covenant agreement recorded in Scripture says He will. In fact, we can argue that while the psalmist is convinced God will do something, there is actually no resolution to the lament within the psalm itself, just like in **Psalm 44** and **88**. Consider just a handful of statements. In **vs. 25, 28** he writes, "My soul clings to dust...My soul melts away for sorrow" (ESV). In **vs. 51**, the insolent deride him. While in **vs. 75**, the psalmist says it was done in faithfulness, he still claims his affliction comes from God. In **vs. 84**, he questions God, wondering how long he'll have to put up with this before God will fulfill His responsibility to judge the persecutor. In **vss. 121-122**, he pleads with God not to leave him to his oppressors or let the insolent oppress him. In **vs. 153**, he pleads for deliverance. His final statement in **vs. 176** is a request that God come find him like a lost sheep (we should probably read this simply as a metaphor of a good shepherd who leaves the 99 to seek out the 1 lost, instead of a metaphor of the sheep's sinful straying. After all, in the same sentence he claims he doesn't forget God's commandments).

So, what is actually going on in this psalm?

The psalmist, a card-carrying member of the Israelite covenant with God, is afflicted, persecuted, and oppressed. He believes his very life is in danger. He is filled with sorrow and mourning. He feels hounded by his enemies. And he wonders why God hasn't done anything about it yet. Why does he wonder this? Because the documentation of the covenant says God will do something about this. Notice the first two sentences: "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!" (ESV). This beginning is not written in a vacuum. It is based on **Deuteronomy 28:1-14**. "And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God" (**Deuteronomy 28:1-2**, ESV). Read the blessings Moses listed there and see if the psalmist's description of his situation fits with the promise of God. It doesn't match up. Thus, the psalmist is upset.

However, despite the discrepancy, the psalmist is absolutely and in all other ways convinced that God is faithful (**Psalm 119:90**), His commandments are true (**Psalm 119:151**), and His promises are life (**Psalm 119:50**). He is hanging on to God's Word because it is the only place he finds hope. God hasn't done what He promised...yet. However, He will in the appropriate time.

Psalm 119:92-93 is a central theme to the advice of this psalm: "If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life." In the next article, we'll look at some specific lessons we can learn from this psalm about using God's Word as a lifeline in troubled times. For now, simply note how the psalmist was able to survive this troubled time. By delighting in God's Word.

Sadly, God's Word is so prolific in our modern time we can take it for granted. We all have our very own copies, perhaps multiple copies. We can read it any time we like, which often translates into putting off reading it until later when it is more convenient. When trouble hits, we may feel like we already know the Word of God and have no need to dig in. But what this psalm drives home again and again and again is that what we really need most in times of trouble is God's Word.

What trouble are you going through now? Do you know what you need most? To marinate your mind in the Word of God. What trouble will you face tomorrow? Who knows? But do you know what you need to do most to prepare for it? Slather your soul with God's Scriptures. His Word is wonderful. His rules are right. His testimonies are true. His promises are perfect. His statutes are sure. His law is lovely. His precepts are powerful. So be careful to consider and keep His commandments.

God's Word is not your homework this week; it is your lifeline.

—Edwin L. Crozier