

Psalms 119:1-16 Sermon

Today we're continuing our mini-series looking at some of the Psalms, and today's Psalm is famously the longest chapter in the whole Bible. It's a huge acrostic poem divided into 22 sections corresponding to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and where every one of the eight lines in each section begins with the letter for that section. It's a literary work of art. And so what theme, I wonder, gave rise to this amazing masterpiece of literature? A love poem? A heroic rescue? Some philosophical ballad perhaps? The answer is that this Psalm is all about following God's laws.

If you're anything like me, your immediate response is dismay or confusion – how could following laws produce such artistic inspiration? Laws are restrictive and boring; whereas art is creative and liberating. So today we'll look at the first part of this monster Psalm and try to get to the bottom of the issue.

There's so much to say. Someone once described this Psalm as a school metaphor where God is the teacher, creation is the classroom, the servants of God are the pupils, the lesson is God's law, and what is being taught is how to live life. And this is a good analogy, but it fails to grasp emotionally the delight in God's instruction that is expressed. Therefore, we're going to look at the Psalm under three headings: Lesson, Testimony, and Prayer. I'll explain...

First, the Lesson.

There are loads of things we can take from this huge Psalm, but there is a big theme running through it, and that's about God's ownership of his laws. The 'lesson' belongs to God. We'll unpack this with some word studies. In verse 1, the word 'law' is the word 'Torah' which you may have heard of since this is a really important word in Jewish teaching. It means 'teaching' or 'instruction.' Happy are those who walk within the teachings of God. Then in verse 2, we read 'happy are those who keep his decrees,' and the word 'decrees' is a word that's all about God's own witness to himself. We think 'decrees' and we tend to think 'rules to be obeyed' but the word here carries with it the sense that these instructions tell us about God and what he's like, so we can emulate God with our whole heart, as the line continues. This seeking is an ongoing action that heads towards the sense of completeness we get from the word for 'blameless' in verse 1. So in the first couple of verses we have a sense that God's teachings are a witness to his own character which sets us on the path towards completeness, and therefore our appropriate response is to seek and seek and seek God and then walk in God's ways, following the lifestyle of God.

In verse 4 we meet God's 'precepts', a strange word which is about applying truth to life. God speaks truth, but that needs to be applied to our real and daily lives, not just a little bit, but diligently, or in the Hebrew 'kept exceedingly' or if you like a footballing phrase, 'Total keeping' of the application of God's teaching to our lives.

In verse 5, we read that our ways are steadfast in keeping God's statutes. The idea of statutes is the idea of an engraving. God's teachings aren't a passing whim, but are engraved forever on our lives, and by following them we have a chance to be held steadfast through whatever life throws at us.

Then in verse 7 we read 'ordinances'. This word connects with those things that God has decided upon. They are an authoritative pronouncement, spoken by God. In learning and following these, we are agreeing with what God has decided upon.

In verse 10, the writer says that he seeks God, and in doing this, he seeks to be where God is known to be found. In this response, we begin to get the sense of how God's teachings can delight, as, of course, God can be found within his pronouncements, his instructions, and his applications to life which are engraved forever. The writer says he will treasure these words spoken by God, and this includes not just mentally remembering and trying to be good, but also an emotional and willed embeddedness of God's teachings in his whole person. This leads him to emphatically announce that he will meditate on all this and fix his eyes on God.

Apologies for lots of word-focussed stuff all in one go, but it's important. All through the Psalm, the laws, teachings, statutes, ordinances, precepts, etc. are all God's. They begin and end with God. They are engraved by God and they do not change. They tell us about God, but not just as a tool for us to seek to examine, but because God's character is revealed to us through them. To get to know God, meditate on his teaching. If you want to be closer to God, seek God with your whole heart. If you feel lost, fix your eyes on God's ways. That's how the writer feels, and it's because the whole Psalm keeps reminding us that God's laws are God's. They aren't of human origin and therefore they talk to us of God himself. They call for obedience and delight, because they reveal the character of God. To follow any other teaching would be to put human teaching in the place of God's, and therefore to seek to indwell and absorb flawed human character rather than God's infinite and perfect self.

It's a heavy lesson, but it is absolutely essential for our delighting in God's teaching. When we forget whose it is and what it reveals, no wonder we have trouble delighting! The Lesson is God's and God's alone.

Second, then, the Testimony.

The purpose of the Psalms, and this one in particular, is to become part of the worshipper, those who serve God. They recount the works of God, and therefore they give reasons to praise him. At the same time, they give us the words and the means to praise, and they also provide comfort and hope in dire moments. But they do this best, when they become a real part of each one of us, like they clearly have done to the author of Psalm 119.

Psalm 119 is a compound of law and art, quite unlike anything we are used to. It is exceptionally constructed. 8 lines per section, 22 sections, each line beginning with the corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and within each section a progression of theme so that the Psalm tells a whole story. It is full of repetition, and some have therefore found it daunting, but it is intended for reading aloud and therefore repetition is a good and useful oratory device, so that, like waves crashing onto a beach, the theme is expressed again and again and again until it sinks into the sands of our hearts, not just our heads.

The Psalm repeats over and over that God's teachings are from God and that we should seek them. It repeats the delight that the author finds in seeking God and following his ways. It repeats his resolve to keep at it, rain or shine. It repeats his determination that this is the way to happiness and completeness in life. In this prayerful repetition, we become people who receive the author's testimony and embody it. We may find ourselves drawn to meditate on God's teachings ourselves, and through that, find that we become people of Testimony to: people who can also say that for ourselves we have experienced what the author experiences - that happiness comes from following God and walking in his ways and fixing our eyes on him. We become people of testimony for ourselves as the waves of meditation on God's teachings mould us into the people we were created to be.

Lastly, Prayer.

God's teachings, his Torah, his word to humanity is not to be studied like I would study some speech from the Prime Minister on lockdown restrictions. Instead, it is to be studied in prayer and meditation and treasured in our hearts. The word, Torah, as I said earlier, means God's instructions. But it is also a record of God's dealings with humanity. It shows us who this God is and invites us to walk in the way that God has set out for us, and to spend time, getting to understand better God himself. This sense of contemplation of God is of course prayer. And so, we learn from this Psalm that prayer is how we read, absorb and contemplate God and his teachings. It is in prayerful posture that we approach the Bible and God himself. As an old saint put it, we approach with 'faith, seeking understanding.'

It's a very different experience, reading the bible for academic or intellectual reasons and reading it prayerfully and in a posture of wanting to follow the ways of God. The author of our Psalm talks about trying to be where God is known to be found, and this is in prayerful contemplation of the scriptures. This takes time, but clearly the author of the Psalm believes that God's teachings are life-enhancing and therefore delights in the time spent and emphatically pronounces his determination to keep doing it. Once the fountain of God has been tasted, one must drink their fill and keep returning for more. The writer doesn't suggest that this is a discipline that he grudges, but that this is a delightful opportunity to explore God and explore his teaching.

At the end of this fairly heavy look at the first bit of Psalm 119, I hope that you can glimpse that because God's teachings belong to God, they are not just another human set of rules, but a picture of God himself, intended to enhance our lives and make us flourish. By making them part of us, just as a wave washes onto a beach, we can become people who testify, like the writer, of the delights that God brings to our lives, and the happiness there is in orienting ourselves towards God. This orientation is by prayerful contemplation of God and his teachings, and it is in this that we walk in the ways of God.

At this time of lockdown, perhaps it is time to spend more time contemplating and prayerfully reflecting on God's word, in the Bible and in the person of Jesus himself – the word of God made flesh and who lived among us, died for us and rose again. This story of Jesus, and all the rest of the Bible, reveal God to us and to help us to delight in his teachings for our lives, applied to our own situations, and leading us to a full and complete way of living. Let's pray and study for that! Amen.