

## Valuing God's Word

May 17, 2009

Purpose: To help us acknowledge that obedience to God's Word is the way to liberty and happiness

Key Bible reference: Psalm 119.1-130

Key Verse: Psalm 119.105

Psalm 119:1 is the longest chapter in the Bible. Indeed, it is longer than many biblical books (for example, while Psalm 119:1 has 176 verses, Jonah has only 48 verses and Ephesians only 155). However, this huge, sprawling text is also tightly structured. Like Psalm 34:1 [Lesson 8], Psalm 119:1 is an acrostic. But while Psalm 34:1 is an incomplete acrostic—the Hebrew letter waw is missing—in Psalm 119:1 the acrostic form is fully realized. The psalm consists of twenty-two sections, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, each section consisting of eight verses beginning with that letter. This style of writing was not just for artistic value but reinforced the psalmist's theology that God's instruction is all encompassing, covering all for all time, covering everything from A-Z or in this case from Aleph to Taw.

Aspects of nearly every type of psalm can be found in Psalm 119:1, from hymn to thanksgiving to prayer for help. Some scholars argue that the mixture of forms is part of the point the psalmist wants to make. By deliberately drawing from and referring to a variety of sacred texts, the psalmist aims to express "a more comprehensive understanding of God."

The theme of Psalm 119:1 is expressed in the blessing pronounced in the first two verses: The word translated "law" in Psalm 119:1 is in Hebrew torah. "Law" is perhaps not the best translation of this term. "Instruction" may

better express what the psalmist has in mind. In fact, eight different legal terms are used in Psalm 119:1, ordinarily one to each verse. In addition to "law" (torah), these terms are "decrees," "statutes," "commandments," "ordinances," "word," "precepts," and "promise." Most of this legal vocabulary comes from Deuteronomy, where these terms describe different aspects of God's law. However, in Psalm 119:1 no attempt is made to define any of these technical terms; and no distinction is made among them. Biblical scholars suggest that in Psalm 119:1 these terms are all interchangeable with torah: They all represent instruction.

Note, though, that this is the Lord's instruction. Consistently, all these terms are identified as the property of the Lord; it is "the law of the Lord" (verse 1), "his decrees" (verse 2), "your precepts" (verse 4), "your statutes" (verse 5). Confirmation of this insight comes even in the apparent exceptions to the rule. In Psalm 119:3 none of the eight torah terms appear. However, the psalmist speaks of the blessed as those "who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways" (Psalm 119:3).

Similarly, Psalm 119:90 speaks of "your faithfulness," evident in the establishment of the created world (see Psalm 19:1, which also places the Lord's torah alongside the Lord's creation as being alike changeless and reliable). Psalm 119:122 does not refer to the Lord's

instruction at all. However, this verse does identify the psalmist as "your servant," indicating again an attitude of obedience and submission consistent with the theme of this psalm.

Psalm 119:1 does not identify God's instruction with the written law. This is an important distinction, for the ideal of obedience to God's will can all too easily be corrupted into petty legalism. Remember that Jesus' opponents chastised him for breaking the law, while Jesus rebuked them for neglecting "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23). Unlike those among the religious leadership who opposed Jesus, the psalmist recognizes that God's instruction is also God's gift, which must be rediscovered in every time by every seeker.

The poet who has given us Psalm 119:1 set for himself a daunting task. Using a basic theological vocabulary of eight terms meaning "law" or "instruction," he set out to write twenty-two eight-line meditations on the place of God's teaching in the life of the pious, committed believer—one meditation for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. What is more, the psalmist attempted to incorporate into his poem the various styles of the texts in which he had encountered God's instruction, including nearly every form of psalm. The result, Psalm 119:1, is a remarkable achievement.

Psalm 119:1-8. As we observed above, Psalm 119:1 is divided into twenty-two eight-verse meditations. There is no clear sense of development in the psalm from beginning to end—indeed, as Carroll Stuhlmueller observed, "One can start at the end and read the verses backward, and it makes equally good sense." However, we can perhaps distinguish within

each section a particular approach to the overall theme of following God's instruction. In this first section the psalmist praises God's instruction and outlines its benefits. As stated above, the psalm begins by pronouncing a blessing upon those who follow the Lord's torah and "seek him with their whole heart" (119:1-2). The mood throughout this section is positive and uplifting until the final line. Then, without warning or transition, the psalmist cries out, "Do not utterly forsake me" (119:8).

To understand this abrupt change in mood, we need to understand that the psalmist has no doubts about the goodness of God's instruction. He believes that "those whose way is blameless... who also do no wrong" (Psalm 119:1, 3) are guaranteed God's blessing. However, he is acutely aware that he himself is not blameless. Rather wistfully, he writes, (Psalm 119:5-6)

Meditating on the goodness of doing God's will, then, makes the psalmist painfully aware of the situations in his life that do not conform to God's will. Paradoxically, the evil person is never troubled by evil. It is the one who desires to follow God who becomes most aware of and sensitive to the presence of sin in his or her life.

Verses 9-16. The second eight-verse section of the psalm is, appropriately, a prayer for help in keeping God's torah. The prayer begins with a question: "How can young people keep their way pure?" (119:9). Perhaps this question is more important now than it has ever been before. In a troubled world like ours, how can youth possibly "keep their way pure"? The psalmist's answer is still a good one: "By guarding it according to your word" (119:9). Bible study cannot be optional! As the psalmist writes, (Psalm 119:11) when we know what the

Bible says, we can call to mind passages to help us make decisions and to comfort us in times of trouble. Without this resource we are poorly prepared to deal with the crises that will surely come.

Verse 45. This verse appears in a section (119:41-48) that Patrick Miller describes as a prayer for deliverance. The psalmist is surrounded by enemies "who taunt me" (119:42) and fears being "put to shame" (119:46). Yet even in this setting of persecution, the psalmist says, "I shall walk at liberty" (119:45).

For the psalmist, the Lord's torah is "the perfect law, the law of liberty." Following God's way sets us free from bondage to the crowd. We need no longer fear being taunted and shut out unless we "go along." Following God's instruction, we can stand boldly in the face of any opposition. As the psalmist writes, "I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame" (Psalm 119:46).

Verse 105. This verse opens a section (119:105-112) about faithfulness in affliction. In troubled and uncertain times, God's Word is "a light to [our] path," providing direction for living. Doubtless this verse will remind you of John 8:12, where Jesus says, "I am the light of the world". What the psalmist says of the Lord's instruction, John claims about Jesus. Knowing and trusting in Jesus, the believer can move confidently through life. Similarly, Matthew

5:17 affirms that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. The most certain knowledge of God that we have is what we learn in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. What is more, the instruction of God manifest in Jesus is not only a matter of knowledge but also a matter of experience. The believer, participating by faith in Jesus' death to the world, also experiences the new life of Jesus' resurrection and the world-transforming hope of Jesus' promised return (see Romans 6:1-11; 8:18-25).

Verses 129-130. These verses begin a prayer for help in the faithful observance of God's law on a note of praise. Why should one keep the Lord's decrees? The psalmist, who elsewhere has given numerous reasons, here strikes closest to the heart of the matter: "Your decrees are wonderful," he writes; "therefore my soul keeps them" (119:129). The best reason for loving and serving God is not to be found in any promised practical benefit—particularly because, as Scripture and history should surely have taught us, the practical benefits are often scant. Ask Job or Jeremiah or Paul or Jesus himself if following God guarantees wealth or health or long life! Finally, the only reason to love and serve God is that, in the presence of the Lord, we can do nothing else. Ultimately, we should seek out and desire to follow God's instruction simply because it is God's instruction and because God is God! "Your decrees are wonderful," O Lord! What other reason do we need?