

# The Impact of God's Word

## A study of Psalm 119

All quotations are taken from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

The psalms have always had a unique and special place in the heart of the people of God, and there is good reason for this. They are words directed directly to God and evidence a living relationship, where passionate feelings and expressions of deep commitment explode before us. We enjoy them because on the whole they are fresh and spontaneous and they seem to describe the joys, sorrows and frustrations we also live. Furthermore, we are attracted to them because in every psalm we sense action, something happens between its writer and his God.

### **Rich Variety**

Unlike the New Testament epistles, the collection of 150 psalms were written within Israel over a many many years. Much of the history of Israel and some of its leaders (like David, Solomon, Moses) is mirrored in the psalms, leading to the common distinction between Community Psalms and Individual Psalms.

As is usually the case, God seems to inspire His people especially in times of change, when something significant happens in the life of the writer, his family or his nation, something that gives occasion for joy or distress. Perhaps you have noticed this in your own walk with God: that it is in times of suspense, anxiety or pain that we experience the Lord with such reality! It is times of happiness and joy that we feel so moved to sing and praise our Lord! It is no surprise to find that the psalms also echo such experiences, be it a victory in Israel or expressions of wonder, as the author reflects on the beauties of creation. Some psalms are the fruit of conviction of some sin, others reflect frustration at observed injustice. These different causes have led to the second mayor classification of the psalms: Psalms of Praise and Psalms of Lament. Most psalms belong to one of these 4 types, namely:

1. Communal praise psalm, like Psalms 113 and 124,
2. Communal lament psalm, like Psalm 80,

3. Individual praise psalm, like Psalms 40 and 103, and
4. Individual lament psalm, like Psalm 13.

There are, however, other ways of grouping psalms, such as Creation psalms (Ps. 8), Royal psalms (Ps. 2), Enthronement psalms (Ps. 47), Messianic psalms (Ps. 22), Liturgical psalms (Ps. 24), Wisdom psalms (Ps. 1), and so on.

## **A New Psalm**

Have you ever tried to write a psalm? Reflect on what the Lord has been doing in your personal life or the life of your local church. How is your experience compared with God's revelation in Scripture? Write something to your Lord about it. Put some words to your experience. If you are going through a rough patch, write a lament style psalm to the Lord. At a later date you will read your psalm and may wish to add a paragraph of praise or deliverance as you look back and see the Lord's faithful hand. Personal psalms of praise will surely be a source of future encouragement. Perhaps someday, some friend may even put some music to one of your psalms and it could become a new communal psalm! Classic hymns are a blessing to the church, but there is a constant need for new songs!

## **A Special Psalm**

Psalm 119 differs from most psalms in that it is not a spontaneous song but rather a carefully structured and ornate writing. It is called an acrostic psalm because each one of its 22 paragraphs begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Acrostic psalms, though more difficult to write, were so written because they look nice and make it easier for people to memorise. Psalm 119 is probably the most elegant of the acrostic psalms, in that each of its 22 paragraphs contains 8 verses and each one of the 8 verses begins with the same letter of the alphabet. A total of 172 (=22x8) nicely arranged verses. This psalm, together with psalm 1 and the second half of psalm 19 (easy to remember 1,19,119) are the 3 psalms that have the Law of the Lord as their main subject, and therefore are usually included among the Wisdom psalms. "Your decrees are the theme of my song" (Psalm 119:54).

In our culture, it is difficult to get excited about the term Law. We usually associate it with rules and regulations, as did the Romans. The Greeks, however, used the term Law refer to customs or traditions. The Jews, as did the author of psalm 119, use the word Law or Torah to mean the whole teaching, instruction or revelation of God, which, of course, includes God's formal laws or rules but is much more. In order to capture this broadness, the author of this psalm makes use of 8 different words: law (singular-torah), laws (plural), word, statutes (or testimonies), commands, decrees, precepts and promise.

## **Why Bother?**

The psalmist makes no secret of the attributes which attract him to God's word. In his mind, there are many benefits for those who would choose to meditate on God's word.

1. **God's Word is True:** (v. 151). Correct understanding of the Truth leads to freedom. He enjoys God's word because God has used it to "set my heart free" (v. 32), and his desire to continue to "walk about in freedom" (v. 45). We also as Christians can live under the bondage of social or religious pressures to conform. We can also be tied down by our own expectations. It is the correct understanding of Scripture truth that will allow us to break free and enjoy our new life in Christ.
2. **God's Word is Perfect:** (v. 96). Technology and human ideas always need revision, correction or upgrading. But God's word is perfect and cannot be improved. "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word" (v. 9). For older men and for women, the recipe is the same! Blessed or happy are those who choose to use God's perfect word as the basis for their lifestyle (v.1). They can't go wrong.
3. **God's Word is Eternal:** (v. 160). Tax laws are law for a while. Then they change. Politicians, like pop stars and economic gurus become the "in thing" for a while. Then they change. Our faith rests on the eternal unchanging word of God, a secure anchor in a temporal and changing world. "Great peace have they who love your law" (v. 165).
4. **God's Word is the Word of God:** The psalmist is not primarily a lover of books and writings, but a passionate lover of a great God. He gets excited, not out of a love for laws and commandments, but because they are "your laws" and "your commandments". He is not an academic believer but a relational one. He has learnt to hear God's voice through Scripture: "for you yourself have taught me" (v. 102). Scriptures are still God's primary way to communicate with His people. Do you want God to speak to you?

## Benefiting from God's Word

One cannot help but notice the author's enthusiasm with God's written revelation. It is quite contagious.

1. **He is positive towards it:** "I delight in your decrees" (v.16). "Your statutes are wonderful" (v.129). "I love them greatly" (v. 167). Oh that we would love and value God's Word like the psalmist!
2. **He is humble before it:** "I stand in awe at your laws" (v.120), "my heart trembles at your word" (v.161). Do we have a similar appreciation of the authority of God's revealed word? Do we accept it humbly and reverently? or do we argue with it and seek to adjust its plain meaning to suit our likes or dislikes?
3. **He expects God to speak through it:** I love the author's graphic sense of expectation as he prepares to read and meditate on God's word: "I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands" (v.131), "My soul is consumed with longing for your laws" (v. 20). Does this sense of expectancy mirror our attitude as we open God's word?

4. **He is determined to obey it:** “I will always obey your law, for ever and ever” (v. 44). Conversion is marked by a decision to yield oneself to Christ. Similarly, growth in the Christian life is based on a conscious decision to obey God’s word, regardless of what we find. “I have promised to obey your words” (v.57). Like a marriage vow, “I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws” (v. 106).
5. **He seeks help to understand and to obey it:** “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (v. 18), “Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees... Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart” (v. 33, 34). We all live under different social pressures and have our own likes and dislikes. We need a sincere heart and God’s help to avoid arriving at wrong conclusions from Scripture.
6. **He spends time with it:** For the author, God’s word is not just food for special events, or for Sundays. During the day, his mind would go back to it “I meditate on it all day long” (v. 97). “My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises” (v.148).
7. **He makes decisions in the light of it:** He not only would view God’s word as “my counsellors” (v.24) but would strive to relate the principles of God’s Word to his daily living. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (v. 105). Do you allow the Word to shed light on your path? To what degree does it influence your decision process? Does it make a difference in your family and business life?
8. **He admits to straying from it:** We evangelicals usually find it difficult to admit to personal departure. Not so the psalmist. We have no doubt as to the direction of his heart, since as he looks around him “Streams of tears flow down from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed” (v. 136). Yet he ends his song with a painful admission “I have strayed like a lost sheep” (v. 176). He pleads “Let no sin rule over me” (v. 133). Do you also feel the pain of your own specific departures? While we try to sustain a artificial “I’m OK” image, it will be difficult to hear the Lord speaking. But the psalmist also found out that “Your compassion is great, O Lord” (v. 156), and therefore he abandons himself in his gracious arms. Are you real? Are you trying to hide something? Turn to the Lord and open up before Him. He is just as great and compassionate today!

## Stop and Reflect

One of the arts lost in our busy and goal oriented modern society is that of contemplation or mediation. We do so much, we see so much, yet how seldom we stop and ponder the significance of what we are living. We are a culture of shallow people. In Scripture, that man of God is called to think and consider, to weight things up. In this psalm the author stops and reflects on at least four things:

1. **God’s Word:** “I will meditate on your precepts” (v. 78). It is a matter of turning a verse over and over on our minds, stressing different words

within the verse, while we ask ourselves “what is the Lord trying to say to me?” Without mediation on Scripture, we shall never have a change in lifestyle, neither will we develop convictions.

2. **My Ways:** “I have considered my ways and have turned my steps” (v. 59). Is your life going where you would want it to go? Have you thought about how you are currently spending your time and money? Have you considered how you influence the atmosphere in your home and in your local church? Unless you determine otherwise, your life, like a river, will flow in the direction of least resistance. “All my ways are known to you” (v. 168), but do I take the time to know them? Before we can turn our steps and improve our ways, we must stop and reflect.
3. **God’s Works:** “I will meditate on your wondrous works” (v. 27NRSV). We are encouraged and educated as we read about the acts of God on Scripture and in history: creation, the flood, the OT and NT miracles, the story of redemption, the great revivals of the last 5 centuries, biographies of men of God. But we know that God is still active in the world today. Do we take the trouble to stop and reflect on what God is doing in our life and round about us? Do we identify and enjoy the wondrous works of God in the “normal” and exceptional events of our today?
4. **God’s Ways:** “I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways” (v. 15). It is as we reflect over time on God’s works that we begin to gain an appreciation of God’s ways (or paths), His normal routes. We shall never fully understand God’s ways, but we shall observe patterns in the acts of God. For example, the psalmist observed that one possible reason for affliction is disobedience. “Before I was afflicted I went astray” (v. 67). Instead of complaining, he prayed “in faithfulness you have afflicted me” (v. 75), and then concluded “It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees” (v. 71). Do we see some of our afflictions that way? As I meditate on God’s works, one fact which fascinates me is our Lord’s love for variety and surprise! (where we usually feel more comfortable with uniformity and predictability). As the years go by, our conclusion will inevitably be that of the psalmist: “You are good, and what you do is good” (v. 68). Hallelujah!

## The Correct Sequence

Most natural processes display an order or a sequence. Before a reaping, there must be a sowing. Before teaching, there must be a learning. We see the elements of progression also in this psalm.

1. **Learn:** “Teach me” (v. 12) is the author’s prayer, since his desire is to “learn your righteous laws” (v. 7). Do we have a desire to grow in knowledge of the Scriptures? What I have observed is that it is usually the new believer who is keen to dig into the Word with an open heart and mind. But after a couple of years, we think we know enough Bible, our theological arguments are now firmly in place, and we simply stop praying “teach me”!

2. **Take to heart:** Here the author's prayer is "Turn my heart towards your statutes" (v. 36). It is one thing to know God's word with our mind, another to accept it with our heart. It has been said that the slowest 50cm journey is from the head to the heart! But until we accept truth with our heart, it will not affect our value system and therefore not influence our behaviour. "I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (v. 11).
3. **Obey and Enjoy:** The joy in the Christian life is not an academic mental gratification of having lots of correct statements in our head. Neither the satisfaction of knowing you are right and proving others wrong. No, the joy is when we sense the Lord's pleasure as we live the truth which has filtered from our head into the heart. We only read of the Ethiopian rejoicing after he understood his need for baptism and was baptised by Philip. "I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands" (v. 60). "Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight" (v. 35).
4. **Teach:** Only until God's truth has settled happily in our heart and it has been tested through personal obedience, are we in a condition to "speak of your statutes before kings" (v. 46). It is not so much the knowing as the knowing and living together which attracts others to the Lord and His Word. Yes, the beauties and benefits of God's law are not just for a privileged few. We have a responsibility to share them, to make them known abroad.

## A Happy Relationship

Although psalm 119 has the word of God as its main theme, it would be incorrect to say that the psalm is about the word of God. We have seen that the psalm is much richer, in that it shows how God uses his word to alter the life and destiny of the believer, and how the believer uses God's word to learn about his life and his Lord. Scriptures are the key to a growing relationship.

In this psalm we note many references to this happy relationship. In the middle of trials and difficulties, the psalmist has learnt to sense the presence of the Lord: "Yet you are near, O Lord" (v. 151), and to rest in the assurance that "You are my refuge and my shield" (v. 114). It is no wonder that the writer prays "accept, O Lord, the willing praise of my mouth" (v. 108), and "Let me live that I may praise you" (v. 175). "You are my portion, O Lord" (v. 57). But none of this is automatic. The Lord reveals himself only to those who truly seek Him. Are you enjoying the Lord? Are you growing in your experience of Him? Dear brother, dear sister, let us not settle for a technically correct, academic, lifeless Christianity. We are now children of God, let's learn to enjoy our Father. The psalmists' prayer is nearly desperate: "I call with all my heart; answer me, O Lord" (v. 145). "I have sought your face with all my heart" (v. 58). This can also be our plea. "Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart" (v. 2NSRV).

Philip Nunn  
London, England  
May 2001

Source: [www.philipnunn.com](http://www.philipnunn.com)