

**Psalm 119:1-8 No. 1****“The Long Psalm”****August 16, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We are going to read just the first eight verses of the psalm, not because I intend to pay particular attention to those verses, but just to have some of the psalm ringing in our ears as we begin.

I am beginning this evening a short series of evening sermons on Psalm 119. You are familiar with the Psalm, of course. You know it is the longest chapter in the Bible. You know it is one of two psalms devoted to the subject of the Word of God, the other being Psalm 19, which we just sang a few moments ago, easy to remember since the numbers 19 and 119 are a matched set. It clearly is a psalm about the Word of God, but, as we will see next time, it is more than that, more than a celebration of the Word of God in the same way Psalm 19 is a celebration of divine revelation.

I’ve always wanted to preach this psalm, but have always been daunted by it. It is, after all, very long – 176 verses! – and, at first glance, and second and third, seems highly repetitive. There have been entire books devoted to the exposition of Psalm 119, the most well-known among them that by Charles Bridges, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglican. Its enduring value is indicated by the fact that, old as that book it is, one can still get it in a new edition! Charles Spurgeon wrote that Bridges’ work on the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm was “worth its weight in gold!” I have read the encomiums, the praises of the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm by great Christian men. Luther said he would not exchange one leaf of the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm for the whole world. But statements like those are more likely to intimidate the preacher than to encourage him. He thinks, or I have, both, “What am I missing here?” and “How can I make the congregation feel about the psalm as those great men felt about it?”

Part of the challenge had always seemed to me to be to find a middle ground between a verse by verse exposition – which must, it seemed to me, prove mind-numbingly repetitive – and a merely superficial summary of the psalm as a whole. But I read some fascinating new material on the psalm during my recent vacation that helped me to understand the psalm in new ways and to develop a plan for introducing the psalm to you. I say “introduce,” because as we proceed through this series I hope it will become clear to you that it is the very nature of this psalm to defy mastery, as if we were ever going to be able to “get to the bottom” of Psalm 119. Like the Word of God, which is its subject, it is incapable of mastery. What Psalm 119 invites us to is the life-long investigation – mental and spiritual – of the Word of God, and, through that investigation, the constant discovery of new depths of meaning and application that we may certainly explore but never exhaust.

The Psalm itself is both a meditation on the Word of God *and* a summons to meditation. You are familiar, of course, with its famous v. 97:

“O how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.”

Actually the words “meditate” and “meditation” occur a number of times in the Psalm. What is more, as we all remember, the psalm mentions in virtually every one of its verses the Word of God, using a variety of different biblical terms for that word: “statutes,” “rules,” “commandments,” “word,” “precepts,” “testimonies,” “promise,” and so on.

We are going to begin to consider this evening what it means to meditate on the Word of God and how we might obey the summons we find in this psalm to do just that, you and I. But before we do, and to help us understand what meditation means, it is vital that we appreciate the psalm as an exercise in meditation *in its original context*. I think my failure to grasp this original context was fundamental to my failure genuinely to appreciate the psalm and to understand how we are to make use of it ourselves. It is obviously important to know how the psalm functioned in the lives of its original hearers: why it was written as it is and how the devout made use of it in their own walk with God.

We begin with the role of sacred documents in the ancient world. The very first thing we need to appreciate about Psalm 119, what would have been obvious to its ancient hearers and readers, but which is by no means obvious to us today, is that it was *intended to be memorized*. “Memorized?” we say. “All 176 verses?” Yes; absolutely. Classic moral texts in the ancient world were not, like so many books today, simply an exercise in transmitting information, still less in providing entertainment as books usually are for us today. *They were intended to enculturate those who heard them, to form their characters in ways thought to be good and right in any particular culture*. That is, they were a means of imparting a worldview to those who learned them, who recited them, who came to know them, a way of thinking and a way of living. And since people *heard* these works in those days and did not read them, they had to be learned by heart. Very few copies of books existed in the ancient world. No one could run to the bookstore to pick up his own paperback copy of *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation epic or Homer’s *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. We don’t know when the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm was written, but it is very likely that it was at least a few centuries after the writing of Homer’s two great epics.

In the same way, the books that we now know as the Old Testament were *heard* not *read* by the ordinary Israelite. They heard them at the synagogue, they heard them at school, and they heard them recited at public events, especially the great feasts of Israel’s liturgical calendar. This is a fact of some significance concerning the entire Psalter, not simply Psalm 119. These were hymns intended to be memorized and known by heart. The psalms were intended not simply to teach, but to inscribe on the heart the theology, the ethics, and the personal, spiritual view of the world and the implications of that view that Yahweh had taught his people. Memorization was the path to spiritual maturity because it was the means of internalizing the Word of God. This was the widespread practice of the ancient world, as true of Buddhist monks and their sacred texts as it was of Israel and the Old Testament. Indeed, until the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it was not uncommon for even ordinary folk to have immense portions of their sacred texts committed to memory.

In this sense, as in so many others we have noticed through the years, Israel and its Bible were products of their time. Throughout the ancient world, the great literature of a people was intended to preserve and inculcate what was considered the wisdom of that culture, whether Egyptian, Babylonian, Ugaritic, Greek or Hebrew. In all these cultures, the great texts were

regularly chanted or sung. We don't often think about this in regard to music, and certainly it is not the only function of music in the Psalter, maybe it's not the *principal* function of music in the psalter, but one of the reasons the Psalms were sung was *to make it easier to memorize them!* I suspect you might be embarrassed to admit how much utter nonsense you can remember because a jingle was attached to it. I have been able to spell *encyclopedia* from my early years, because Jiminy Cricket taught me to sing it! "E-n-c-yc-lo-p-e-d-ia." Can you sing the entire theme song of the *Beverly Hillbillies*? I can. "Come listen to my story 'bout a man named Jed, a poor mountaineer, barely kept his family fed..." But what I can't recall is the entire text of Psalm 119, and one reason I can't is *because I never learned to sing it!* I'll bet you, I'm morally certain that you have more memorized a great deal more than the 176 verses of the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm in texts that you can sing. Indeed, just the first verses of many hymns that you can sing by heart add up to that much and more.

Plato tells us that when Greek children had learned their letters, their alpha, beta, gammas, "they [were] furnished with the works of good poets to read as they sit in class, and are made to learn them by heart..." Why? Plato explains. "Here they meet with many admonitions, many descriptions and praises and eulogies of good men in times past, that the boy may envy, may imitate them, and [long] to become even as they." [*Protagoras* 325e-326a, cited in G. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 44]

These works both instructed the young in the virtuous life as the Greeks understood virtue – the love of glory, the value of cunning, the importance of honor, and so on – and inspired them to emulate those virtues in their own lives. "At dinner parties Greek men were expected to show off their learning by reciting these poems." They were also performed at the great festivals of Greek public life. The Greek historian, Xenophon, recalls a man by the name of Nicoratus saying:

"My father, wishing me to become a good man, made me learn the whole of Homer, so that even today I can still recite the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by heart." [*Ibid*]

Now, don't fail to grasp precisely what that man was saying, all the more given that we know that such feats of memory were not uncommon in the ancient world. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, taken together, are about the same length as the Old Testament! He had memorized that much material! Is that possible? Oh, yes; it's possible. There are Jewish men today who have most, if not all of the *Tanakh* memorized. ("Tanakh" is the Jewish name for their Bible, what we call the Old Testament.) I remember Professor Bruce Waltke telling me that when studying in the Holy Land, there lived across the hall in his apartment house a Jewish scholar with whom he became friends. And as they conversed, especially about the Bible, it dawned on Bruce that the man had the Pentateuch and the Psalms committed to memory, and perhaps much else of the Old Testament as well.

As you know, we have been learning more and more about the literary techniques employed by the writers of the Old Testament books. What we may have failed to realize is that many of these techniques were employed to aid memorization. You may wonder why there is so much poetry in the Old Testament, not only the Psalms but large portions of the prophets as well. Well poetry is easier to commit to memory. This is true in particular of Hebrew poetry that is characterized by thematic parallelism. If you remembered the first line or *stich*, it would be much easier to

remember the second, because it was obviously related to the first in some way: the same thought put differently, or expanded, or whatever. But many of the specific literary devices employed by the poets and the writers of prose were also intended to aid in memorization.

Consider, for example, the use of *chiasmus* or inverted parallelism. We find it everywhere in the ancient scriptures, in prose and poetry. It is not at all difficult to understand how chiasmus would help you to recall a text that you have memorized. Consider, for example, the *Song of Songs*, a poem that seems clearly to have been constructed in chiasmic form. Once you know the structure of the poem, as you recite it you know how it is going to proceed section by section, because it is going to repeat the theme and often even the wording of the earlier parts of the poem in the later parts. And you will remember in what order the parts fall because they are parallel to one another in an inverted order: abccba and so on. Many psalms make use of this device, tremendously helpful to someone who wants to learn a psalm by heart and retain what he has learned.

Or consider an acrostic poem, such as Psalm 119. An acrostic poem is one that follows the order of the alphabet with each new verse or new section beginning with the next letter. For example, the book of Lamentations is a set of acrostic poems (at least chapters 1-4). You'll notice that chapter one has twenty-two verses, the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse begins with the next letter of the alphabet. Chapters 2 and 4 likewise have 22 verses. Chapter 3 has sixty-six verses, three times twenty-two, and so the first three verses begin with *aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second three verses begin with *beth*, the second letter of the alphabet, and so on down to the last letter tau.

In the case of Psalm 119, each verse in each section of eight verses, begins with the same Hebrew letter, beginning with *aleph* in the first section and proceeding through to alphabet to *tau* in the last section. Do you understand? It is as if each of the first eight verses began with a word that begins with "a," each of the next eight verses, began with a "b," each of the next eight with a "c," and so on until we reach the last eight verses, all of which begin with a "z." That would be a more of a challenge for an English poet than a Hebrew poet, with comparatively few words to choose from that begin with certain letters, say a "q" or a "z." If the Bible were written in English, if Psalm 119 had been written in English, the word "xylophone" would probably be found in it because finding eight serviceable words that started with "x" would be stretch for any English language poet! But, as a matter of fact, the Hebrew poet had a similar problem with the letter "waw," which begins very few words in classical Hebrew. Fortunately, the letter by itself is the Hebrew word "and," so each verse in that section (vv. 41-48) begins with "And," a fact invisible in the English translation. In any case, if you want to learn the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, just turn to Psalm 119, because they are listed there in almost every English translation, as the heading of each of the 22 eight verse sections of the poem.

Do you see? How much easier to memorize in the first place and then remember Psalm 119 when you are given the great help of knowing that each following verse would begin with the same letter! We pay little or no attention to this as English speakers because we read the psalm in translation from our printed copies of the Bible. We never learned it by heart in Hebrew and we don't feel the need to remember it verbatim because we can consult the printed text of the psalm any time we want.

There are a number of other features of the psalms one by one and of the Psalter as a collection that seem to have been conceived as aids to memorization. The use of key words, of repetition, of inclusio – a phrase or sentence that both begins and ends a psalm or section of a psalm – of refrains, and so on. Psalm 1, for example, is not an acrostic poem, but it is no accident that its first verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and its last verse begins with the last letter. For a Hebrew speaker that would have been a great help in memorizing and remembering the psalm. The psalms are arranged in a particular order as well, in five books that recall the five parts of the Pentateuch. [Wenham, 50-51] But you get the point. We don't begin to appreciate the nature of Psalm 119 until we imagine it memorized by heart, and often recited to oneself and to others. Such would have been how this psalm was known in ancient Israel.

Now when you think of Psalm 119 as a text that was committed to memory and recited from memory, it is easier to appreciate that we should understand the psalm as having a *religious* function or purpose, more than a theological or didactic purpose. As I thought about my own previous understanding of Psalm 119, I had to admit that I had long thought of the psalm as primarily instruction in the nature and value of the Word of God. I think that is the way most people think of it nowadays. But now I don't think that is right. It certainly does teach us *something about* the Word of God – not so much as you might suppose – but its primary purpose is religious exercise, not theological instruction. That distinction may not seem obvious to you, so let me explain.

There are two very distinct, though certainly not unrelated, uses of the Bible. These are clearly distinguished, for example, in our *Shorter Catechism*. At the very beginning of the catechism we are asked:

“What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?”

And the answer comes back:

“The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.”

We might refer to that use of the Bible as the *theological or doctrinal use*. The Bible contains the truths that we are to believe and the commandments we are to obey. It is the source of our *direction* for faith and life. It is the repository of true and reliable knowledge about God and the way of salvation. But many questions later, near the end of that same *Shorter Catechism*, we come to this question:

“What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?”

And the answer follows:

“The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”

Then comes the question:

“How is the Word to be read and heard that it may become effectual to salvation?”

And the answer:

“That the Word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.”

In those later questions and answers the catechism is describing the Word of God not as the source of doctrine and ethics but as a means or method of our experience of God’s grace and salvation. This is the *religious* use of the Bible, as the vehicle of spiritual life, of communion with God, and of the transformation of the heart. Here we are not talking about simply learning *about* the faith or the moral system taught in the Word of God, but considering the Bible as God’s voice, as an instrument of his presence, as a means by which he both makes himself known to us and transforms our hearts and lives according to his will.

If you stop and think about it, I think you will realize this is one of the difficulties we face *as readers rather than as hearers of the Bible*. It is so easy for us to take a passive approach to what we read – the words are there on the page for us to see; we read them, we take whatever value we may from them, and then move on to something else. In that way we *make use* of the Bible, perhaps important use of the Bible, but we are often not conscious that the words on the page are the very voice of God. We are tempted in that way to take an overly didactic approach to the Bible, to consider it almost exclusively as a source of theology and ethics rather than as the power of God in our hearts or as a rope that ties us directly to God. We may learn from what we read and be glad for what we have learned, but we are not conscious as we read of the particular, the unique, the one of a kind nature of the words of the Bible. They are words and we are very used to words, millions of them, of all kinds. As words on the page the Bible’s words are mixed up in our minds with thousands upon thousands of other words that fall under our eye every day. In that way their unique character and power are forgotten.

This attitude toward the biblical text, however much we may reverence it as the Word of God, is then strengthened when, as we will and sometimes must, we spend time discussing what a particular passage means. We are interested in its propositional content. If you read biblical commentaries, as I do day after day, you will find yourself, as I do, sorely tempted to think of the text of the Bible like any other text. It is to be investigated, different opinions about its meaning must be surveyed and evaluated, arguments must be weighed for or against a particular interpretation, and, having drawn a conclusion, on we go to the next paragraph. Do this often enough and long enough and the theological use of the Bible almost completely overwhelms its religious use.

*How different is the view of the Word of God expressed in Psalm 119!* There is very little here about how one first must figure out what a passage of the Bible actually teaches and then and only then spin out its moral and spiritual applications. This is not a passage that teaches us how

to interpret the Bible or about the contents of the Word of God. What you find here is something very different, an expression of the psalmist's pleasure in the Word of God, the delight he takes in it, his sense of its beauty and splendor, and, more than that, his longing to take that Word and more and more make it a part of himself. "Oh how love I your law! It is my meditation all the day." I tell you frankly, reading most commentaries on the Bible nowadays, and most scholarly articles on various biblical texts, even those by devout, evangelical scholars, will not cultivate the *love* of the Bible or an aching hunger to internalize it and make it the very substance of your inner life. They used to say of John Bunyan that he was *bibline*; that is, if you pricked him anywhere, he ran *Bible*. That was how completely he had internalized the word of God; he thought the Bible, he felt the Bible, he talked the Bible. That was true of the man who wrote Psalm 119 and that is the purpose of the psalm: to make us like him!

"Anselm of Canterbury compared Scripture to the honeycomb: 'Taste the goodness of your Redeemer, burn with love for your Savior. Chew the honeycomb of his words, suck their flavor, which is more pleasing than honey, swallow their health-giving sweetness.'" [cited in Wenham, 53]

Well that is what we see the man doing who wrote Psalm 119! He's chewing the Bible, savoring it as if it were a honeycomb. He's sucking the sweetness out of it and we get to watch him and hear him do it. The author of Psalm 119 is not talking about the theological reading of the Bible but of the religious reading of it! Ezekiel, you remember in chapter 3, was told to eat the prophetic scroll, a metaphor that perfectly describes what the psalmist is after: the incorporation and internalization of the truth of God, its power of spiritual nourishment and its inspiration of the practice of the faith in one's daily life. Merely knowing what the Bible teaches about this or that does not produce that kind of internalization. For that the Bible must be literally *consumed*, until it has become part of the fiber and fabric of one's inner life, until one thinks as the Bible thinks and feels as the Bible feels.

"Man is what he eats," said the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. And that is more true than Feuerbach realized. So we read Jeremiah saying:

"When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight."

*That* is what we will find in Psalm 119. This man was a *consumer* of the Word of God. He had taken it in, made it part of himself. It was a power in his heart, a living force. The word of God was a supreme pleasure to this man. It made him happy. It also made him sad in various ways as we will see. It captivated him with its genius and beauty, with its powerful personal effect, and it proved to him a mine from which he continued to draw day by day new and wonderful treasures. The text, in other words, had become and continued more and more to become part of his character and his personality. He was, as we used to say, a Bible man.

Think of it this way. I once saw a program on *PBS* in which a wine connoisseur was teaching the audience how to appreciate and evaluate wine. He was perhaps what is called a *sommelier*, someone who makes his living by choosing the right wines for this meal or that. He gave this very elaborate and somewhat off-putting demonstration of how wine is to be sampled. The first test was the eye-test. How does the wine appear in the glass? How does it reflect the light? Next

you would swirl the wine in the glass and then hold your nose up to the goblet's rim and smell it. He told you what wine experts learned from the bouquet or aroma of a wine, what they call its *nose*. Then you would – and I'm not sure precisely how to describe this – suck the wine rather noisily into your mouth and then swish it around inside your mouth. The wine is held in the mouth for several seconds to saturate the taste buds. The sensations that the wine produces on the tongue are another clue as to its quality. Wine experts use its taste to evaluate the complexity of a wine. Precisely why and how I cannot now recall. If he had been talking about iced tea I could have recalled the entire presentation. Then you spit it out and concentrate on how the wine continues to taste on your tongue. I think they refer to this aftertaste as a wine's *finish*. These five steps – the five “s” steps: see, swirl, sniff, sip, and savor – are the way in which an expert comes to *know* a wine. Obviously one should not do this in the restaurant unless one is dining alone and is happy to remain alone! But the idea was, by these various methods, to get to the bottom of a particular wine, to know it, to appreciate it.

Well think of Psalm 119 in such a way. This man is smelling and swirling and sniffing and sipping and savoring the Word of God over and over again. He's coming more and more to appreciate its beautiful appearance, its wonderful aroma, its complex flavors, and its aftertaste. And he is coming to love this wine more and more the more he tastes it.

*Now* it is not at all hard to see how different must be the effect of a text that has been committed to memory and is carried around with someone in his or her heart. You and I read the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm perhaps only once a year, as we make our way through the Bible. We read it quickly because we must to keep to our schedule and because it is very long. And we pass on to the next psalm and then the next after that. What we have read in Psalm 119, even if a verse or statement made an impression at the moment, is quickly forgotten. The text, alas, has made a very faint impression on us, if any at all.

But if we had the text in our heart, if we were frequently reciting it or portions of it to ourselves, if we were able to recall it in a conversation with others, if its beautiful cadences were always sounding in our soul, if we sang it to ourselves using a familiar tune, its impression might be very great indeed. That was the case for the author of Psalm 119 and *that* is what the psalm is intended to create a longing for in us: that we would internalize the Word and come to be engaged with the Word of God as the very voice of God every moment of every day as this man had. What we are going to see as we look at the psalm is that it describes the many effects that the Word of God has on a person who takes that Word to heart in the same spirit of gratitude, longing, and submission that marked this man. It humbles, it encourages, it directs, it inspires, it elates, and it does all these things moment by moment day after day. A memorized text has a character-forming effect on the memorizer. It enters into his way of thinking and forms and shapes his responses to the various experiences of his life. Listening to a biblical text we can be passive. Even reading it we can often remain passive. But memorizing a text, singing it and often reciting a text are activities in which personal engagement with and commitment to the text is natural if not inevitable. Will some of you young people take up the challenge and memorize the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm? It will be more difficult for you than it would have been for a Hebrew speaker those long centuries ago. He had all sorts of help written into the psalm to help him remember what comes next. You don't have any of that. But then, they didn't just memorize the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm, they memorized most of the Old Testament, so this should be a snap for you.

Indeed, as we will see, the various terms the psalmist employs to describe the effect of the Word of God on his heart together emphasize how *personal* the Word of God has become to this man. We know how *impersonal* Holy Scripture can become, even to those who claim to believe that it is in fact the Word of God. Wittingly or unwittingly, it becomes simply an account of truths that are to be believed or commandments that ought to be obeyed. But it is not a matter of deep engagement, of powerful emotion, of longing and sorrow and joy. Christianity has often become this for entire generations of so-called Christians. Lord Melbourne, British Prime Minister in the 1830s, once said, “You know, things have come to a pretty pass if religion is going to become personal.” [Cited in Lloyd-Jones, *The Heart of the Gospel*, 59-60] This was the situation the Great Awakening men encountered a century earlier. Everyone was a Christian in Great Britain in the 1730s, but for most of them the Christian faith was the wall paper of their lives, not a living power in their hearts. Indeed when Whitefield and Wesley and the others came among them preaching what they called a “felt Christ,” they were offended by what they considered this novelty. Theirs was not a faith that led them to commune with God themselves. It was not a faith that bred within them a longing for more of the Lord and a deeper holiness of life. It was not a matter of, as Paul put it, “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

But that *is* what you get in Psalm 119: *a felt Christ* and a longing for more.

“The psalm itself is an extended prayer that God will instruct the psalmist, so that he will love God with all his heart...” [Wenham, 84]

Indeed, it is important to remember that the psalm, long as it is, *is a prayer*. It is itself a conversation with God. It begins as if it is a confession of faith – “Blessed are those whose way is blameless” – but very soon the third person becomes the second: “You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes.”

Just ask yourself this question: when was the last time you prayed like this man prayed and asked for what this man was asking for through 176 verses of his prayer? So, as we begin our consideration of this great Psalm, let us remember what the psalm was and should always be: a personal engagement with God, through his Word, by a man who longs for nothing so much as that the Word of God may take its place and exercise its power in his heart and his life.