

Psalm 119:9-16, No. 2**“A Psalm of Lament”****August 23, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Last time we noticed some of the interesting features of this long psalm. For example, it is an acrostic poem with each verse of each succeeding eight verse section of the poem beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Such a device served to aid the memorization of the psalm. It was more than that, to be sure. It also served to suggest comprehensiveness or completeness: the blessing and value of God’s law has been considered, in other words, from “A” to “Z.” But the poem was a sacred text intended to be memorized for the sake of its formative influence on the soul, and the acrostic construction certainly was an aid to memorization.

Psalm 119, however as we shall see, is not primarily a didactic poem. It doesn’t tell us how to interpret the Law of God; it doesn’t discuss the contents of the Law of God; it doesn’t teach us how to apply the Law of God to our individual circumstances. It urges upon us meditation on the word of God, but it doesn’t *teach us how* to do that. It is certainly about the Word or the Law of God, but in another way. This psalm is about the incorporation of God’s law into the heart and life, the internalization of it until it has become a controlling principal of one’s life. To that end, meditation on the law of God is a principal subject of the psalm. It is not only a summons to meditation, it is a description of the mind of a man who has practiced that meditation.

But that raises an important question. What is meant in Psalm 119 by the Law of God? “Word,” “commandments,” “statutes,” “rules,” “testimonies,” and “precepts,” are all terms found in the eight verses of the psalm we read as we began and found repeatedly throughout the psalm? In fact, there are eight terms that are found repeatedly throughout the psalm (each used between 19 and 25 times), with a few others added now and again. [cf. L. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, WBC, 139] But, taken together, what do those terms refer to? Is the psalmist only referring to the actual commandments of the Bible: the Ten Commandments and the other laws listed in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy?

There have been those through the years who have accused the author of Psalm 119 as a proto-legalist or Pharisee, more interested in obedience to commandments than he is in the grace of God. [Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 83] But there are good reasons to doubt that.

First, by the terms he uses, the psalmist makes clear that he isn’t talking only about the commandments of the law but about the Word of God in general, the entire divine revelation given to us in Holy Scripture. True enough, we read in v. 10:

“...with my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments,”

which is a statement and a prayer any Christian ought to agree with, but we also read, say in v. 50:

“This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.”

The focus of the psalmist is not only on the commandments, but on all that the Word of God teaches him about God and about himself and about the way of salvation and the life of faith. As you know, the Hebrew word *Torah*, often translated “law,” which happens to be the word for divine revelation used most often (25x) in Psalm 119, is also a title for the Pentateuch itself, even for the entirety of Holy Scripture. Either use of the term suggests a great deal more than simply a list of biblical commandments. The word is perhaps better understood as “instruction” than narrowly as a legal command, and certainly includes the narratives of Genesis and Exodus and Numbers that teach us of the story of God’s election and redemption of his people, of God’s character, his love for his people, his faithfulness, his mercy, his justice, and his power to save, all of which feature also in Psalm 119. In other words, the law or word the Psalmist is constantly talking about, delighting in, and yearning for, includes the story of Israel’s salvation, including perhaps, depending on the date of the Psalm, even her return from exile in Babylon, as well as all the teaching of the prophets, the wisdom of the sages, even the hymnal of which Psalm 119 would eventually become a part.

Second, while there certainly are, as often elsewhere in the Bible, statements made by this psalmist that he has kept the law of God, they rest cheek to jowl next to statements of longing that the psalmist *be made able* to keep the commandments of God. This man is no Pharisee, confident of his own righteousness. So we have, for example:

“Take away from me scorn and contempt, for I have kept your testimonies.” [v.22]

“This blessing has fallen to me, that I have kept your precepts.” [v.56]

But, we have more often expressions like these of longing that he *might* keep the law faithfully.

“Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!” [v.5]

“Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word.” [v.17]

“Give me understanding that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. [v.34]

“Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways. [v.37]

Indeed, verse 9 which we read this evening, sounds, does it not, like the sentiment of a young man who has learned only too well how hard it is to be faithful to God’s commandments, and v. 10 like the thought of a man who, alas, knows from hard experience how easy it is for even a devout person to wander from the Lord’s commandments.

Is this not, in fact, the inevitable tension of the Christian life. We are committed to God’s Word, with its entire message of salvation by grace leading to holy living. We see it as the explanation of the origin of a good and worthy life, but we also see it as demanding such a life of God’s people. What is more, we do keep the commandments of God. But, at the same time, we Christians are of all people the most conscious of our failure to keep the commandments. We

have been given to see what true goodness is. We see how it is defined and reflected in God's Word, in the commandments themselves and in its historical narratives. We want to live that way. But we are all too well aware of our failures to do so. So you have Paul in one and the same section of his great letter to the Romans, writing in intensely personal ways about the conquest of sin in a Christian's life and the still terrible battle with sin that nevertheless continues in that same life. We have John saying in his first letter that the Christian does not sin, and earlier in that same letter encouraging his readers to acknowledge their sins and confess them to God. Which is it? Well, as every Christian knows, it is both. And it is both here in Psalm 119.

This man is both rejoicing in the grace of God that has caused him to see the law of God for what it is and to orient his life to that law, on the one hand, and, on the other, he is mourning his own still great disobedience to that law and crying out for help to overcome it. Is that not your life and mine every day? The author of Psalm 119 "is no legalist, content with a round of duties: he will press for nothing short of God's vitalizing touch. Otherwise, his religion, he knows, will be dead..." [Kidner, *Psalms* TOTC, ii, 422]

Third – remember, I'm telling you why we should not think of Psalm 119 as some exercise in legalism or as a concentration on obedience divorced from the evangelical principles of biblical faith – while at first glance we might categorize Psalm 119 as a wisdom psalm, primarily didactic, like Psalm 1 (where in a similar way we read of the psalmist's delight in the law of God and of his meditation in that law) – and some scholars do so still today (e.g. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, 419; and, partially, Allen, 139) – there is reason to think it should not be so understood. First the psalm is a prayer. Indeed sixty of its 176 verses contain a petition and thirty-eight verses contain some expression of sorrow or trouble. [Wenham, 89] Taking the whole psalm together, the author is lonely, discouraged, frustrated by the opposition and contempt of others, worried by his own failures, and anxious that God should intervene. In all of this his circumstances are like so many other writers of laments in the Book of Psalms. Second, as one scholar has recently argued, like so many of the psalms, Psalm 119 has all the other features of a lament. In it the author "prays to be delivered from his troubles so that he may keep the law with his whole heart." Already, at the beginning, this note is sounded clearly: in v. 8 we read "I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me!" Something is up in this man's life.

Listen to one commentator describe the contents of the psalm.

"Most likely writing in the postexilic era, the psalmist knows firsthand the oppression of evil. He has been surrounded by wickedness, pursued by the arrogant and proud, humbled by sorrow and disgrace; yet his refuge is in God. He constantly cries out to God, retreats into his shadow, and finds solace in his strength. This is a psalm, not only of law, but of love, not only of statute, but of spiritual strength, not only of devotion to precept, but of loyalty to the way of the Lord. The beauty in this psalm resounds from the relationship of the psalmist and his God." [W. VanGemeren, *Psalms, Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, 736-737]

Consider the verses in the *Qoph* section, from 145-152:

"With my whole heart I cry; answer me, O Lord!

I call to you; save me, that I may observe your testimonies.
 I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope in your words.
 My eyes are awake before the watches of the night...
 Hear my voice according to your steadfast love; O Lord, according to your justice give
 me life.
 They draw near who persecute me with evil purpose; they are far from your law.”

And on it goes. So in the next section it begins the same way:

“Look on my affliction and deliver me, for I do not forget your law.
 Plead my cause and redeem me; give me life according to your promise!
 Great is your mercy, O Lord; give me life...
 Many are my persecutors and my adversaries...”

And later still:

“Let my cry come before you, O Lord...
 Let my plea come before you; deliver me according to your word...
 I long for your salvation, O Lord...
 Let my soul live and praise you... [vv. 169-175]

And, then, the final verse of the psalm:

“I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your
 commandments.”

Derek Kidner, a commentator of uncanny insight, as well as a master of compression, – I don’t know anyone who said so much in so few words as Kidner – has this to say about our author.

“The attacks on the psalmist are taking the form of derision (22), slander (described, by a curiously modern touch, as smearing him, 69), and intrigue (23, 85). The fact that the authorities persecute him by devious means suggests that the regime is not openly apostate; but such verses as 87 and 109 show how murderous the pressure can be. And he is young, it seems (the young man of verse 9 is himself, to judge from the context...), and sensitive to scorn (‘the reproach that I dread’, 39); his isolation makes him low-spirited: ‘small and despised’ (141), drained of vitality and dried up (25, 28, 83). Like Jeremiah, another thin-skinned personality, he is alternately saddened and infuriated by what he sees, reacting now with tears (136), now with ‘hot indignation’ and ‘disgust’ (53, 158).” [422-423]

As you perhaps noticed, the expressions of loyalty to God and his law are, in context, designed to motivate God to hear and answer the psalmist’s prayer. As a lament, the psalm is a prayer uttered in a time of great need, an expression of spiritual desperation. Its statements are like those we have read a hundred times in the Psalter. The believer is in trouble. He cries out to God for help because he has nowhere else to turn. He believes that God will be true to his character and his word but he does not yet see, he cannot now see *how* God is being faithful. More than half of the

psalms in the Psalter have this character. They are the prayers of believers in trouble. It is because there are so many such psalms in the Psalter that the book has been and is today so beloved of God's people. *It meets them where they live!* And, like any other believer, the argument he made in prayer to God for such times is this: "Lord, I *am* committed to you. Unalterably committed. It is my heart's desire to live a life of faithfulness before you, to serve you, and to love you in attitude and action. Therefore, come to help me, because *I am yours*. I don't just profess to be yours, I *am* yours, by the deepest commitments of my heart and life. And you have taught me that my fidelity to you ensures me that you will not fail to come to my aid. That is the obvious logic of his petition for help as it is in so many of the lament psalms. God should recognize this man's loyalty and hear and answer his prayer. [Wenham, 84, 91; cf. Allen, 144] In other words, his troubles tightened, they did not weaken his grip on God's Word. [Kidner, 423]

It is too often a weakness of Christian spirituality that it so often lacks this boldness in making an argument to God, in applying the theology of the Bible to the circumstances of one's life. In the Psalms if things are not as they ought to be, whether in one's own heart or in the circumstances of one's life, the psalmist is never afraid to appeal to what God has taught him about himself and to the promises he has made in his word.

And *finally, in the fourth place*, the language of the Psalm is perfectly in keeping with the teaching of the Bible regarding the Christian life. It is the Apostle Paul, after all, the champion of justification by faith, who writes that what matters "is keeping the commandments of God." [1 Cor. 7:19] It is John, known for his emphasis on the love of God, who writes that that the one who says that he knows God but "does not keep his commandments is a liar." What is more, there is no sentence in the New Testament that so perfectly captures the spirit of Psalm 119 as 1 John 5:3:

"For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."

As the Scripture teaches us in so many different ways, the paradox is that the more completely we are ruled by the Law of God, the more free we become as human beings. Obedience to the law does not enslave – that is the Devil's lie – but liberates. It frees a man or woman up to be what he was meant to be and to find in life what is truly satisfying and pleasing. That is what the psalmist means when he writes in v. 133:

"Keep steady my steps according to your promise, and let no iniquity get dominion over me."

And when he says in v. 45, "I shall walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts," he means that life as it ought to be opens before the prospect of the man who knows that God's Word is not only true but describes the way to all that is best in human life. This is the sense of the famous v. 105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

I have sometimes used the illustration of playing a musical instrument, say a piano. The laws of piano playing are rigorous; they must be learned and mastered by constant obedience over time.

But what is the result? Freedom. I can't play the piano because I never submitted myself to the discipline of that obedience. I never learned the piano's laws and how to keep them. So when I sit down to play the piano all I can do is hesitantly to play notes with one finger. But some of you have become obedient to the instrument and you can sit down before the same keyboard and play whatever you want beautifully. You can enjoy the life of the piano, you are free to do that. I cannot; I remain a slave. Don't tell me obedience is not the path to freedom and happiness because it so obviously is!

In any case, as one scholar sums up the total impression of Psalm 119:

“The note of urgent necessity that ends the psalm puts its author much closer the publican in the gospel parable than to the Pharisee. Instead of affirming his own righteousness, the psalmist solicits the help of God and reaffirms his constant desire for conversion.”
[Wenham, 92]

Let me conclude this evening with this. Another way to make this point about the character of this Psalm, to enter into its evangelical theology and spiritual mind, is by means of modern speech-act theory, the analysis of human language made popular by the later 20th century philosophers of language, the Englishman J.L. Austin and the American J.R. Searle. Their work is far more complicated than I will make it sound, but, at bottom, it was useful in recognizing that the words people speak are more than simply statements about this or that; they are themselves actions. They *do* things. As I pointed out at the Bestvater-Aown wedding ten days ago, the vows spoken at a wedding actually change the status of the couple, change them from single people to married people. The vows create the marriage today, as they have for ages past; such words *make the marriage*. (Interestingly, this is so true that they do so even if the couple is being married before a judge or a justice of the peace.) They are what linguistic philosophers call *performatives*, because the words don't simply sit there, they get up and do something!

Well our question tonight, then, is: what sort of statements do we find in Psalm 119? The philosophers have categorized the statements we make in different ways, but many speech acts are called “commissives.” In making a statement or in speaking certain words the speaker either explicitly or implicitly *commits himself or herself to do something*. Whether the typical language of a promise is used, a promise is made.

Verse 32 is obviously a commissive statement:

“I will run in the way of your commandments...”

But so it v. 30:

“I have chosen the way of faithfulness...”

The psalmist isn't just *saying* something, he is committing himself to something. All such language is self-involving. The author is involving himself in a course of action. The Lord often makes commissive statements, when he promises to do something, and we make them when we make promises to him in return. And, surely, whether we make a promise in so many words, or

simply imply a commitment to action, the Lord will take us at our word. Even sentences that may seem at first glance simply statements of fact, often have a commissive force. For example, if a psalmist says, “The Lord reigns,” he is as much as committing himself to the Lord as *his own* king. He is acknowledging that he *is one of the Lord’s subjects*. And in doing so he is as much as promising obedience and service. This is all the more true in statements that occur in worship or in prayer. When one is speaking to God obvious implications of his or her statements cannot be ignored, still less denied.

This Psalm is a prayer, as we have already said, and a prayer has, in the nature of the case, an ethical implication. “Praying commits the worshipper to the values and standards that he articulates in his prayer.” [Wenham, 92] In other words, Psalm 119 is commissive speech from beginning to end. It is prayer in the first person:

“I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me!” [v. 8]

We have in that statement a promise of obedience, to be sure, but we also have an acknowledgement of trust and confidence in the Lord, of active dependence upon the Lord’s help and grace.

Once you realize how much commissive speech there is in Psalm 119, you will realize how much commissive speech *you* utter every time you enter this sanctuary. Whether you are fully conscious of doing so or not, when you sing a hymn in worship you are making promises to God, you are committing yourself to living in keeping with the truth you are confessing about God and yourself. You make commissive statements – statements of personal commitment – by the score every time you gather with the saints for worship. Singing a hymn, even a short hymn such as the *Gloria Patri*, saying a prayer or even adding your Amen to someone else’s prayer, you are making promises and committing yourself to action. If you sing glory to God, you are saying that he *is* a glorious God, and, therefore, having acknowledged that fact, you are committed to living in reverence before God. If not, what did you possibly mean by giving glory to God? If you confess your sins you are acknowledging that they *are sins* – that is, you should not have done them, you should have lived otherwise – and if you confess them to God, you are admitting not only that only *he* can forgive them, but that you are obliged to repent of them and do better. By confessing your sins to God you are committing yourself to a holy life. Of course, you could be a hypocrite and mean nothing of what you say, you could be lying through your teeth, but there is no doubt what the words you speak actually mean. In this way, a properly ordered worship service involves the renewal of our commitment to the Lord from beginning to end.

What does all of this have to do with Psalm 119? Well, that psalm, as a prayer, is a perfect and particularly powerful example of the commissive speech that is part and parcel of Christian worship. No one can recite that psalm, certainly no one can sincerely pray that psalm, without committing himself or herself to God as the only hope of salvation, both in this world and the next, and without committing himself or herself to a holy life, because it is the will of God, your creator, your savior, and your heavenly father. *Psalm 119 is very like the sort of statements you and I make in prayer and worship every day and, especially, every Lord’s Day.*

Psalm 119 both teaches us *how to talk to God* as believers in his Word, *and* what it means to be devoted to God through the thick and thin of life. And that makes this psalm a hugely important window on Christian life and Christian worship.