

Psalm 119:161-168, No. 5**“Why Does this Man *Delight* in the Bible?”****October 4, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Tonight we conclude our consideration of what is often referred to simply as “the long psalm.” We’ve said that it was a psalm meant to be memorized, internalized as an instrument of spiritual enculturation. We said that it was a lament, a fact that alters our understanding of the psalm and its purpose. We spoke of what it has to teach us about the nature of what nowadays we all refer to as our “relationship with God.” And finally, last time, we considered what is meant by the meditation on the Word of God of which the psalm frequently speaks and of which it is itself an illustration.

Tonight I want to consider one of the most prominent notes of the psalm, again something said throughout the poem and in many different ways. I’m speaking of the psalmist’s *love of the Bible* or his *delight in the Bible*, which, I gather, are two ways of saying the same thing. It is one thing to recognize the importance of the Word of God, even its divine authority. But surely it is another to love it and to take delight in it. Look at the characteristic expressions in just the section we read this evening.

1. “My heart stands in awe of your words.”
2. “I rejoice at your word, like one who finds great spoil.”
3. “I love your law.”
4. “Great peace have those who love your law...”
5. “I love your testimonies exceedingly.”

Remember, the man isn’t talking simply about the commandments of the Law of Moses, the Ten Commandments and so on, even when he speaks of loving God’s *law*. All the terms he uses – word, testimony, law, and a number of others throughout the psalm – in this context they all refer to the entire Word of God: its historical narrative, its legal texts, its songs and poems, the sermons of the prophets, and all the rest. All of it is designed to teach theology, ethics, worship, and wisdom, no matter the genre of the particular biblical literature. After all, there is theology even in the Ten Commandments – e.g. the nature of God in commandments 1 and 2 and his work as the Creator in the fourth commandment – as there is law in biblical narrative. There are theology and wisdom in Job as there are ethics and instruction in worship, history, and law in the Psalms.

The members of John and Charles Wesley’s “society” or, in modern parlance their “small group” at Oxford in the 1730s, what their detractors called “the Holy Club” – were maligned as “Bible moths.” The slur suggested that they ate up the Scripture as moths eat up wool clothes. Well, that is what this man did and continued to do and making it all so much easier to be a Bible moth was the fact that he loved the Bible. Reading it and studying it and pondering its teaching was something he genuinely *enjoyed*.

Every Christian should ponder this fact. Why did he *love* the Bible, *delight* in the Bible. And since it is obvious that this attitude toward the Word of God is being commended to us, why

should *we* love the Bible? I can tell you, as a matter of personal testimony, that I can't remember really *loving* the Bible when I was a young man and a young Christian. I knew that it was important. I knew it was the Word of God. I had no doubt about its authority. I grew up in a Bible family. But I don't remember ever thinking that the Bible was a sheer delight to me or that I loved it. But I do now. I think part of the index of my growth as a Christian man, such as it has been, is the fact that I have come more and more to love the Bible and to take real pleasure in reading and studying it. I wish, frankly, that I had come as far in the life of prayer as I have in the life of the Word of God. But I am immensely thankful that I feel about the Bible as I do now.

You might well think – I think I probably thought myself at one time – that having to study two different biblical texts every week and write a sermon on each would grow very tiresome. But, strange to say, it has not. I never resent having to study the Word of God or having to think about how to preach it to you. Whether I did at the beginning of my ministry, now I find Holy Scripture perpetually fascinating and satisfying, and it is *the* great privilege of my calling that morning, noon, and night the Bible is in my hands.

Why should it be so? Why was it so for this man? Before we descend to particulars, let's begin here, with the fact that the Bible is the *Word of God*. It is from God and by it we come to know God. *In a very real sense the Bible can be identified with God himself*. To be sure, the Bible as a book full of pages on which ink is printed, cannot be identified with God. We do not worship the Bible as if it were God. No one can fairly accuse Protestant believers as *bibliolaters* as has sometimes been done, as if Christians worship the Bible *instead of God*. But the fact is that the Bible itself identifies God and his Word. Consider a few classic examples.

In Galatians 3:7-8, at the beginning of Paul's defense of justification by faith and not by works, we read:

“Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’”

Now, to be precise, it wasn't the Scripture that made that promise to Abraham – the Scripture had not yet been written – but God himself speaking directly to the man he had chosen. It wasn't the Scripture that foresaw the salvation of the Gentiles, it was God, who later had that prophecy written down in his book. But to say that God said something and the Scripture said something is to say the same thing.

Or consider Romans 9:17, where we read that “the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’” Well it wasn't the Scripture that said that to Pharaoh, it was the Lord himself speaking through Moses. But once again, it is a distinction without a difference. There are other examples of this phenomenon. Again, to say that God said something and the Scripture said something is to say the same thing. We identify God with his Word. We have biblical authority to identify God with his Word. And, of course, there is nothing particularly unusual or controversial in that. We do the same thing ourselves all the time: identify a person with the words he or she speaks. We understand that in a very real sense the words a person

speaks *are that person*, they are the expression and embodiment of his life, his personality, his purposes, his convictions, his opinions, and so on. We wouldn't know anyone without knowing what he or she *says*. If the eyes are the window of the soul, the words are the door!

So there is both biblical justification for and an obvious logic to the identification of the Word of God with God himself. And surely, above and beyond anything else, *that is why any Christian loves the Bible*. He loves the Bible because he loves God and the Bible is God's word!

But there are other reasons why a man like the author of Psalm 119 would love the Bible and delight in the Bible. A number of very good reasons.

I. Let's begin with a very obvious fact, but one we grow accustomed to and may not appreciate as much as we should: the Bible is a remarkable book; a most remarkable book.

It is an extraordinary book, unlike any other book in the world. Written by a variety of authors, over the course of some 1500 years – a millennium and a half! – in three different languages representing quite different historical and cultural circumstances, the Bible is in fact a library of books, books of very different type but, at the same time, it is a single book. Its diversity and unity are both obvious to any interested reader.

“From the literary standpoint these books are a heterogeneous mix, histories and biographies rubbing shoulders with visions, sermons, poems, philosophical reflections, genealogies, statistics, rituals, and much else. But the books are bound together by a common purpose and by an extraordinary unity of subject matter as they fulfill [a] common purpose.” [J.I. Packer, *Truth and Power*, 149]

For all the diversity of literature which it contains, and for all the ages over which it was written, and for all the human authors that contributed to it, the Bible contains a coherent narrative plot from beginning to end, what we nowadays call a *metanarrative*, an explanation of the history of the world from its origin to its final destiny. Indeed, the Bible in one reading is simply the ever-unfolding of that metanarrative with ever increasing detail. “No other anthology of literature in the history of the world even attempts to undertake [such a task].” [Craig Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible?* 5]

But there is more. The Bible, alone among the holy books of the world, is a book of serious history. It makes a host of historical assertions. It places its story within the ordinary history of human life in the world. In that respect it leads with its chin. But so many of those assertions have been confirmed or at least made entirely plausible by modern archaeological and historical research. There exists today not one demonstrated error of historical reporting in the Bible. Do you have any idea what an astonishing fact that is? I don't say that scholars don't claim this or that assertion of historical fact is in error – they certainly do –, but for each of those claims there are counter-claims by scholars of all stripes. What is one scholar's mistake is another's accurate, often surprisingly accurate historical datum. Fact is, still, after all these years of study and minute examination, we really can go to the Bible – no matter its theological purpose – *to find out what happened in history*. In a way that is both utterly brilliant and wonderfully satisfying the great

message of the Bible is woven into the fabric of human history. That is one reason to love the Bible: it is such an extraordinary, unique performance of human literature.

II. Second, the Bible's tremendous influence for good makes it delightful.

The Bible, without question, has exercised a greater influence upon human beings individually and entire cultures and peoples, a greater influence for human betterment than any other book, indeed perhaps than any other influence in the history of mankind. The story of that wonderfully wholesome influence is undeniably one of the great themes of human history. We cannot overstate how much better human life is today because of the influence of the Bible. People understandably have attempted to deny this, but the effort is futile because the fact is so obvious. A man whose life is shaped by the teaching of the Word of God is invariably a better man; a culture whose life is shaped by the teaching of the Bible is invariably a more just, a more stable, a more happy, and a more prosperous culture.

We have only to ask whether anyone could possibly think that a person would be poorer for learning to live honestly, chastely, faithfully, and humbly, for cultivating a grateful spirit, to bear the afflictions of life with courage and a sense of purpose, and understanding himself or herself obliged to live with regard to the welfare of others, not simply for himself or herself. Few would contest the fact that a life of love ought to be the supreme goal of our daily life. What American public figure would stand up and say, "We need less love in our world today. The world would be better off with a lot less love."? But *that* is the Bible's definition of a human life well lived. Few would dispute that such is the definition of a good life, but many fail to realize how unique to the Bible that definition actually is and how in the Bible alone sufficient motivations are provided to keep a man or woman striving for exactly that kind of life, difficult as it is to live it with our sort of hearts.

Why, after all, is cunning not a chief virtue of human life as it was among the ancient Greeks? Why is torture thought to be evil in our culture when it is widely practiced, even celebrated in many other cultures in our world today? Why is sexual libertinism still regarded very widely, even in our culture, as a betrayal of humanity? Because we know what is right and wrong and, to a large extent, we know why. Men may love to look at porn, but they know very well that women will never respect them for that and no woman will be content to marry a man whose idea of pleasure is looking at pictures of naked women on a computer screen. This technology does not make him more of a man, but less; indeed, it emasculates him. And the fact is, *everybody knows it!* Why? Because the Bible has left its indelible mark on our culture.

The man who wrote Psalm 119 knows very well that he had been made better by the Word of God. That much is clear and that must have been a principal reason for his love of the Word of God and his delight in it. It had done him such wonderful good!

III. There is more. Another reason to love the Bible is that in it we find the truth about the most important things human beings must know.

I have myself come more and more to love the Bible for this attribute, perhaps the more as we enter into a time when the Bible's account of reality has come under increasing public attack.

Do you realize what a privilege it is actually to have a grasp of reality? Readers of the Bible know the answers to the great questions of human existence: where did we come from, what are we here for, and where are we going? We have been given to know why human life takes the form that it does, why we are the persons we are.

It is astonishing, even as it is so wonderfully confirming of the Bible's truth and authority, that all the other attempts to answer those questions are such pathetic substitutes for the searching and satisfying answers provided in the Word of God. I have made a point of emphasizing this in my preaching over the past several years because I want you to be thoroughly convinced of this point and able to articulate it to others.

As I pointed out in a recent sermon, the new atheists may claim that human life is simply a gigantic, utterly improbable accident, that human beings are simply biochemical machines, that our lives mean nothing and are going nowhere, *but they don't live as if any of that were true.*

They may argue that truth and falsehood, right and wrong, good and evil, are actually merely words we use to express our opinions our nothing more than our biological sensations, that they have no independent existence, that moral judgments are not real things, but they don't live as if any of that were true either. *Our human nature itself is the evidence that what we are taught about reality in the Word of God is true.*

We know, as all human beings know – whatever they may say when standing on their feet in a debate – that we are extraordinary creatures, that human consciousness is an absolutely unfathomable reality and cannot be explained as an accident, that the personal cannot come from the impersonal, that consciousness cannot come from the unconscious, that our moral natures are not a fantasy but reflect the nature of reality itself, which is and continues to be an absolutely moral affair. That human beings should think themselves intrinsically important, that we are obliged to use the tremendous gifts we have been given in a responsible and loving and honest way, these are facts of life as we know life to be, indeed as all men know life to be judging by the way they actually think and speak and behave.

We also know that our failures to live an honest and loving life are genuine faults and that we ought to do better than we do. No animal thinks that way. There are no associations of lions meeting to devise alternate sources of food that will not require the killing of prey. But we do and cannot help to do all manner of things just like that. The world rings with man's effort to improve his life morally. We have crusaders everywhere. We're exhausted from all the crusading that goes on around us. Why for goodness sakes? Because we cannot help but evaluate our lives in moral terms and we know very well that we find ourselves falling short morally. Human sin, selfishness, and stupidity may corrupt the improvement process, but that there is such a process and an unending commitment to it no one can deny. That such a process of improvement is one of the great, unchanging realities of social life no one can deny. *We are never satisfied with the level that we have already attained. We must strive for what is better. Again, why?*

The Bible explains this and its explanation is so much more consistent with the facts of human experience than any other explanation ever offered, which is why those explanations come and go but the Bible's remains a constant and why it remains the conscience of the world. Left to

themselves human beings have proved themselves to be capable of the worst forms of cruelty, corruption, criminality, and hatred. They are entirely capable of making life utterly miserable for themselves and vast numbers of other people. But the world never accepts this as a normal state of affairs. We crave justice, and kindness, and honesty, and admire sacrifice on behalf of others. We celebrate it. Again, why?

The Bible explains all of this with its metanarrative of creation in the image of God, the fall of man into rebellion and sin, and the redemption of sinful humanity by the sacrifice of God the Son. No other explanation is nearly so profound, so satisfying, or so consistent with the ordinary facts of human life that are before you every time you open your eyes. Still today, in our so-called scientific age, the worldview taught in the first book of the Bible, is a much more convincing explanation of the world in which you and I actually live than any of those myriad of counter-explanations that have come and gone and will continue to come and go in human history. The new atheists – Dawkins, Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and others – are actually not at all “new.” Their arguments are retreads – you can read most of those arguments in the critics of Christianity who wrote in Greek or Latin in the Patristic period of church history -- and are convincing only to those wanting to be convinced. Even serious professional philosophers who would identify as atheist are embarrassed by their efforts to demonstrate that religion is bad and God does not exist.

Brothers and sisters, the simple fact is, with your Bible in your hand, you know more about reality than 98% of the professional philosophers now working in the American academy, or the vast majority of the professional scientists. *And that is a reason to love your Bible.* It gives you the truth; it gives you your place in the world; it gives you meaning and purpose and hope, what so many human beings crave but struggle to believe is possible. Before publishing his commentary on Galatians, the late John Stott, had preached through the book to his congregation at All Souls in central London. In the preface to the commentary, Stott writes:

“During the months when I was preaching this series, I kept saying this kind of thing to myself: ‘Here we are, a comparatively sophisticated congregation in twentieth-century London, giving ourselves week after week to the systematic study of a short letter written in the first century by a then more or less unknown Jewish Christian to obscure little congregations tucked away in the mountains of Galatia.’ ... This study has left me more deeply convinced than ever of the divine inspiration, and therefore the permanent authority and relevance of the Scriptures.”

Do you see his point? The Bible explains what always needs to be explained about human life. It teaches us and shows us reality as we know it to be. Its great message is based on the only truly satisfying account of reality there is and certainly the only one that has remained unchanged and yet massively influential from the beginning of human history to our own day.

This explains, by the way, the peculiar place of the Bible among the holy books of the world. In Islam there is no critique of the Quran that is permitted. If you ask hard questions of the Quran, you run the very real risk of being branded an infidel and, in some parts of the world, you risk your very life. But the Christian church has always been willing to subject Holy Scripture to the severest critique and test. Why? Partly because God himself, in his Word, records the confusion

and doubt that his people have often had and he obviously shows sympathy and concern for that state of mind. But more to the point the church has always been absolutely confident that the Bible will continue to pass every such test to which it is subjected, as it always has before. Underneath everything the Bible says is the diamond-hard surface of reality!

IV. Of course, another reason to love your Bible, a supreme reason, is that it shows you the path to eternal life.

We have been made to live forever, every human being knows that down deep. We were made for life, not death. Consciousness is the demonstration of that fact. Death is an intruder, something from outside. What is more, we all know that we were made for a better life. We have within us the aspiration to that better life. We all know the difference between what we are and what we ought to be. We all know immediately how our lives should be and could be better. We could be less selfish, more loving; we could be more ready to suffer for what is right – the very same sacrificial spirit we admire in others –; we could be more faithful to our callings as spouses, as parents, as children, as workers, and so on. We would be happier, very much happier, to be better people than we are now. Why on earth should we think this way *except that we were made for perfection, we have the image of it in our souls because we were made in God's image, and we have the longing to be like God, to be worthy of God because that God-likeness is the very thing we lost in our rebellion against God.*

There is something both impossibly beautiful and intensely satisfying in the biblical account of redemption – from the cross to the changed heart – an account that has captivated untold multitudes of human beings through the ages. It is a solution so utterly unlike the cheaper, often bizarre, and always insufficient proposals made in other religions and philosophies of the world.

John Wesley put it best:

“I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air... I want to know one thing – the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way, for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it; here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* (*a man of one book*). Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone; only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book...” [Preface to *Sermons on Several Occasions*]

It is this nature of the Bible as a map to heaven, as an explanation of the way of God's grace, that explains why so many have been saved, have entered eternal life by reading the Bible. J.C. Ryle, the great Anglican bishop of the 19th century became a Christian simply hearing Ephesians 2 being read in a church service. Augustine, long before him, crossed from death to life reading the last verse of Romans 13. Some of us in this church have found life reading the Bible's account of how life is found.

We find in the Bible the hard, even unwelcome truth about ourselves. We find there an account of what God did, and only God could have done, to deliver us from sin and death. The more honest people reckon with the Bible's gospel, its explanation of salvation, the more necessary

this salvation seems to become and the more perfect the solution to our problem that God contrived.

And here too, we find some proofs within ourselves. We are not simply souls, but souls and bodies. Our best and our worst parts are both spiritual and physical. True and perfect humanity can never be the escape of the soul from the body or a disembodied human life because that's not what human beings are; and that's not the true and full goodness of a human being. And yet only Christianity reflects those universal convictions and supports them with the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of our own bodily resurrection in due time – a message that was completely out of accord with the intellectual atmosphere and philosophical thought of the Greco-Roman world of the early centuries of the first millennium that only the power of God can explain why so many people embraced that message when they did.

In a similar way, what every human being wants is not less love, but more. Buddhism, for example, is a betrayal of human nature in its supposing that human perfection is found in the abolition of emotion and of passion. Every human being, down deep, knows it would be altogether better to feel more pain if only we could have more love. That is perhaps unexpected and certainly in some respects the astonishing message of the Bible but you find it nowhere else in the world. Why, after all, does the Dali Lama so ardently *desire* the liberation of Tibet, when according to his Buddhism, desire is the mother of all sin and sadness? He doesn't live according to his religious understanding of the world; no one lives according to that understanding. No one can.

There is so much more to say in explaining why a person might love the Bible and delight in the Bible. We have said nothing about its beauty. True enough, there are passages that are not particularly beautiful – think of the liturgical regulation in Leviticus or the genealogies that begin the book of Chronicles (though that anchoring of the Bible's message, its account of reality, and its proclamation of the grace of God in the life of flesh and blood individuals like ourselves -- whose names we know but of whose life we know nothing, as our names may be known to a subsequent generation but of our lives they will know comparatively little or nothing -- is hugely important and thrilling; for we are just as they were, ordinary people, living ordinary lives at a particular moment in the history of the world) – but there are many, many passages in the Bible that are heartrendingly beautiful. Think of the 23rd or the 121st psalm, those and other psalms that have been so beautifully said and sung at untold thousands of deathbeds, and on battlefields, as in church services. Or think of 1 Corinthians 13 or Isaiah 55 or so many of the episodes from the Lord's ministry recorded in the four Gospels, such as, for example, his dealing with the proud Pharisee and the poor grateful woman at the end of Luke chapter 7. Or think of Job, of which Alfred Lord Tennyson said it is “the greatest poem of ancient or modern times.” Or think of Paul's so gentlemanly letter to Philemon about the latter's runaway slave Onesimus. Or, for that matter, think of the majestic first chapter of the Bible, so many of its phrases and cadences having entered forever into the imagination of the human race.

Compare that ancient literature to other great literature of the period, Semitic or Greek or Latin, compare it to the other holy books of the world, and you will immediately see the difference. Those books belong to their time and, while undoubtedly in some respects may be great literature, they have little to nothing to teach us about the meaning of life today. No one looks to

them to teach any such things, the way that untold multitudes of people look to the Bible. Compare the heroes of the Bible to those of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, or the heroes of some of the ancient near eastern epics and you find yourself in a wholly different and so much higher moral and spiritual atmosphere. The heroes in both the great works of the ancient world and of the Bible have feet of clay, because human beings do, but in the Bible there is none of the silliness, none of the absurd that you find everywhere in those other works. The high morality, the deep spiritual sobriety, the grace and compassion, the sheer goodness of the Bible's teaching and all so beautifully and powerfully served by its prose and poetry makes Holy Scripture utterly unique and powerfully captivating. If you have not read the Quran – not all of it but enough to give you a good sense of the book, I urge you to do so. As a Christian in today's world you ought to know something of its teaching, but, more than that, it will give you still more of a living sense of how different and how much more beautiful and captivating the Bible is, with its many literary genres, its fascinating and instructive biographical detail, its capacity to teach reality and the way of salvation through historical narrative, its realistic portrayal of the ups and downs of believing life, the temptations and afflictions of life, indeed, its panorama of human life, its magnificent hymns and songs, and above all its transcendently beautiful and awe-inspiring description of the living God and of Jesus Christ his son. It appeals to every human power: of thought, of emotion, of will. Compared to the Bible the Quran reads like a table of algorithms.

But beautiful as the Bible is, it is also earthy, worldly in the best sense of the word. Whether in its practical instruction for life such as we find in Proverbs or Paul's letters, in its unabashed recounting of the sins of some of its heroes, or in its honest reckoning with the ponderous pace of divine grace in the transformation of believing life, we get the cold, hard facts in the Bible in a way you do not get them anywhere else. You may imagine you do, but the fact of the matter is you do not, except in those books that are repeating the teaching of the Bible. Anyone who reads the Bible often, thoughtfully, and intentionally, and learns its lessons, is prepared for what he or she will find in life and in the world. Think of its accounts of sexual temptation, or its frank admission of the power of the love of money to misshape a life, or the often punishing mystery of God's providence. This is earthy realism of the sort that every human being needs, much more every Christian.

And finally may I say that I love the Bible and you should too for the way it perpetually repays study. It is a well of truth and no one has yet got to the bottom.

John Robinson, the pastor of the Plymouth pilgrims who remained in Holland, famously promised: "The Lord has more truth yet to bring forth from his Word." That was in the early 17th century. And that has proved true. Every faithful generation of Christians has found more in the Bible than its spiritual ancestors found. The great message is the same, of course, but who would have imagined the revolution in the study of biblical narrative that has taken place over the last forty years or so. The histories of the Old Testament sparkle in a way they never did before, now that we see how brilliantly they were written. We understand the Song of Songs much better than it has ever been understood in the Christian period because of advances in the translation of cognate or related literature from Egypt and Babylon and the new appreciation of Hebrew literary technique. We know more about the history of Israel's kings than previous generations even imagined being able to know. And as one discovery piles on top of another the coherence and unity of the Bible remains not only absolutely unchanged, but brilliantly highlighted.

Brothers and sisters, we ought to love the Bible and we ought to be nothing short of thrilled to have this book in our hands. It ought to send shivers up and down our spine! There is every reason for it to do so. If we don't feel this way about Holy Scripture it is only because we don't fully appreciate what an extraordinary gift God has given to us in his Word and how utterly remarkable it is as the revelation of the truth to the world. The man who wrote the 119th psalm understood this about the Bible and he treasured it accordingly. We should do no less.