

THE A TO Z OF GOD'S WORD

Psalm 119 (verses 1 to 16)

Psalm 119 is a beautiful piece of literature. It is an exquisitely crafted Hebrew poem. It has 22 stanzas, each containing eight verses. The significance of that is that there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The strange words which appear at the beginning of each stanza are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet: aleph, beth, gimel, daleth, and so on.

If we take verses 1 to 8 each verse begins in the original with the letter aleph. In verses 9 to 16 each verse begins with the letter beth, and so on, right to the end of the psalm. It's very skilfully put together.

We would expect that such a carefully constructed poem would have a suitably inspiring theme and we will not be mistaken. The theme of the psalm is God's word.

THE DESCRIPTION OF GOD'S WORD

Eight different words are used to describe God's word. Of course there is an element of literary variation. It would be monotonous to use the same word over and over again but at the same time though all the words are similar in meaning, each one brings a distinct nuance of its own.

Something that complicates matters slightly is that English translators are not consistent in the way they put these words into English. For example, the word 'statutes' in the NIV is translated 'testimonies' in the RSV while the word 'statutes' in the RSV is 'decrees' in the NIV. In the New Century Version it's different again. It talks about 'rules' and 'demands'.

Because we use the NIV as our church Bible I'm going to make that the basis to work from.

1. The law of the LORD, verse 1. This is the Hebrew word TORAH. I wonder what image 'law' conjures up in your mind. Possibly something cold and unattractive, maybe something rather fearful. But in reality *torah* is quite different. It's used in Proverbs chapter 1 verse 8. 'Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.' Where do you think *torah* is used there? Your father's instruction? No, it's actually 'your mother's teaching'. That's *torah*, the tender teaching of a mother to her son.

It's there again at the end of the book of Proverbs in chapter 31. Those of you who know the book of Proverbs well will recognise it as the passage about the good wife and mother whose children arise and call her blessed. Verse 26 says, 'She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.' Instruction, *torah*.

2. His statutes, verse 2. This word is used again in verse 14. The Hebrew word is the plural 'EDOTH. It has the idea of witness or testimonies. God's word is a testimony to his character. It is a faithful witness to who he is and what he is like. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament contain this command: be holy because I am holy. God's word is a testimony to his holiness and because he is holy he wants us to be holy also.

3. Precepts, verses 4 and 15. The Hebrew word PIQQUDIM means assignments. The verb from the same word group is used in Numbers chapter 4 verse 27. The tabernacle was the tent in which worship was offered. When the people of Israel moved the tabernacle moved with them. When the tabernacle was moved the job of carrying the curtains, the ropes and all the equipment used in its service was given to the Gershonite clan. God said to Moses and Aaron, 'All their service, whether carrying or doing other work, is to be done under the direction of Aaron and his sons. You shall assign to them as their responsibility all they are to carry.' That word 'assign' has the same root as the word 'precepts'. God's precepts are his particular assignments.

God doesn't just have a general plan. God has a plan for each of our lives. He has a job for each of us to do. His word comes to us individually and directs us. We receive that direction from his word. Now, it's not going to say, 'Arise and go to Birmingham and there you will find an angel who will tell you what to do.' But if we live our lives according to God's word we will find that he does direct us. Proverbs chapter 3 verses 5 and 6 say this. 'Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.' Specific personal guidance.

4. Decrees, verses 5, 8, 12 and 16. The Hebrew word is CHUQQIM. It's from a root meaning to cut out of stone. An obvious reference is to the Ten Commandments given to Moses on tablets of stone, written by the finger of God. It suggests the absolute reliability of God's word, set in stone.

We live in a world where truth is an optional extra. One of the greatest examples in our time was the famous speech by the politician Jonathan Aitken. *'If it falls to me to start a fight to cut out the cancer of bent and twisted journalism in our country with the simple sword of truth and the trusty shield of British fair play, so be it.'* By contrast God's word is utterly reliable.

5. Commands, verses 6, 10. The Hebrew word for command is MIZWAH. It reminds us that we are accountable to a personal God. A command is more than just a law. A law could have been written hundreds of years ago but a command is something personal, direct, immediate. Notice the change that takes place at verse 4. Verses 1 to 3 talk about God in the third person: 'his statutes ... him ... his ways'. But in verse 4 the psalmist addresses God directly: 'You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.' From then on it's 'your decrees ... your commands ... your laws'.

In verse 73 we read, 'Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands.' This reminds us that God is our creator. He made us. You know the old joke: when all else fails, read the maker's instructions. We live in a world where all else is failing and we have the Maker's instructions.

There are two lovely verses later in the psalm. Verse 32: 'I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.' And verse 45: 'I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.'

6. Laws, verses 7, 13. This is a different word from *torah* in verse 1. The Hebrew word is MISHPAT. 'Laws' here are literally 'judgments'. It has about it the flavour of the legal system, the decision handed down by a judge. It reminds us that God is not only the giver of life but he is also our judge. Each of us will have to give an account of our lives to the God who made us. When we read the Bible it's impossible to miss this fact. Because of sin we are under condemnation but through Christ we can have salvation. Paul said to the Romans, 'Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.'

Judgment need not be a negative thing. Judges are there to be positive as well as negative, to give approval as well as condemnation. God's laws are here to guide us and help us.

7. Word, verses 9, 16. This is perhaps the most neutral word used in the psalm. The Hebrew is DABAR. There is a simplicity about God's word. It's not obscure. It's not code. It's not something that only a privileged elite are allowed to have.

8. Word, verse 11. There's no apparent difference in English but in Hebrew yet another word is used: 'IMRAH. It means 'promise' and that's how it is translated in verses 38 and 41. 'Fulfil your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared. ... May your unfailing love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your promise.' This isn't just a word for now, or even just for tomorrow; this is God's eternal word, the word of promise.

THE APPLICATION OF GOD'S WORD

This isn't just abstract theory. God's word is to be applied. It is relevant for our living and this psalm makes that clear. It's clear in the very first verse. It talks about those whose 'ways' are blameless. It talks about those who 'walk' according to the law of the LORD. In the Bible walking is a metaphor for living, the way we behave, lifestyle.

It's there in verse 1 and it runs right through the psalm. Verse 3: 'They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways.' Verse 5: 'Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!' Verse 9: 'How can a young man keep his way pure?' Verse 14: 'I rejoice in following your statutes.' Verse 15: 'I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.'

When we apply God's word it will have an impact on the way we live. It begins in our hearts. Verse 2: 'Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.' Verse 7: 'I will praise you with an upright heart.' Verse 10: 'I seek you with all my heart do not let me stray from your commands.' Verse 11: 'I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.'

When the Bible talks about our hearts it doesn't mean the muscle which pumps blood around the body. Nor does it mean just the emotions. It covers both the emotions and the mind, everything that goes on in the inner world we inhabit: thoughts, emotions, decisions, reactions, all that goes on inside our heads and our hearts. The great value of God's word is that it does its work there.

God's word is to be applied to our lifestyle. It is to be applied to our thoughts and feelings. It is also to be applied to our speaking, our words. Verse 13: 'With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.' In verse 15 the verb 'meditate' has within it the idea of mouthing God's words, saying them to ourselves.

God's word is applicable to every area of our lives. How are we to apply it?

We must seek the LORD, verse 2. 'Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.' When we come to God's word we must come seeking *him*. The general truth of verse 2 is translated into a personal prayer in verse 10. 'I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.' I wonder if you've made the journey from verse 2 to verse 10, from acknowledging a general truth to making a personal commitment, from 'Blessed are those who seek him with all their heart' to 'I seek you with all my heart.'

We must be consistent. Verse 5: 'Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!' Verse 16: 'I will not neglect your word.'

We must be learners. Verse 7: 'I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws.' Learning implies study, hard work, struggling at times, but always persevering until we understand.

We must be obedient. Verse 8: 'I will obey your decrees.'

We must be worshippers. Verse 12: 'Praise be to you, O LORD; teach me your decrees.'

THE TRANSFORMATION THAT COMES ABOUT THROUGH GOD'S WORD

It's there at the beginning: 'Blessed...' A life of blessing, avoiding what is wrong, doing what is right, delivered from shame, from impurity, from going astray. This life of blessing brings great joy. Verses 14, 16: 'I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. ... I delight in your decrees.'

Last night millions of people were watching the lottery. Just a few were overjoyed to see their chosen numbers come up. How do you think they felt? How do you think they reacted? 'I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.'