

An Introduction to Psalm 119

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[0 : 0 0] we'll take the book of books and turn to the song book in the center of that book to the Psalm of Psalms.

Psalm 119. I'm going to be reading the first stanza of the psalm from the New King James Version, which I consider superior in many ways mainly because it's a word-for-word translation from the Hebrew.

When I've been studying through Psalm 119, I've made a habit of going to the Hebrew. I don't speak Hebrew.

I don't read it. But you can go to an interlinear version where it has each Hebrew word along with the English. So that's been very helpful to me.

So that's the version I will be using. And this is the first stanza. Stanza Aleph. Blessed are the undefiled in the way who walk in the law of the Lord.

[1 : 1 3] Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with the whole heart. They also do no iniquity. They walk in his ways.

You have commanded us to keep your precepts diligently. Oh, that my ways were directed to keep your statutes.

Then I would not be ashamed when I look into all your commandments. I will praise you with uprightness of heart when I learn your righteous judgments.

I will keep your statutes. Oh, do not forsake me utterly. Let me ask you, how do we emphasize things that we're saying or writing?

What are some words or some devices we use to emphasize the meaning of something? Just shout it right out. Exclamation points, right?

[2 : 1 6] Repetition. Very important. What else? We raise our voices to add volume to it, right? You pound the pulpit.

You pound the pulpit. Which is something I'm not going to do. Yeah, there are a lot of devices that are used to give emphasis and additional meaning to what we're saying.

Writers want their writings to get read. They want their writings to be understood, especially those who write poetry. What I read to you doesn't sound to our ears like poetry.

But it is a Hebrew poem which uses many devices to get its meaning across. Hebrew poets use rhyme just like poets do today.

Some of the Hebrew words rhyme. But they also use repetition as was mentioned and also something called parallelism, parallel thoughts that add to each other or contrast with each other or restate the same idea.

[3 : 2 9] One of my favorite examples of repetition in the Hebrew comes from Genesis 14 when the kings were escaping from Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Bible says that they fell into some pits. And these were either tar pits or asphalt pits or slime pits or slime pits or bitumen pits.

Those are four ways it's translated into the English. But the Hebrew says they're pit pits. It uses the word twice.

In other words, they're really pity pits. They're the piteous pits you could imagine. And that's how it describes it. Many times in the Hebrew, names are mentioned twice.

Like Abraham, Abraham. Or Saul, Saul. In the New Testament. So repetition is important. And we'll see a lot of repetition in this psalm.

[4 : 34] In Psalm 119. About the word of God. Parallelisms are phrases that either repeat an idea or add or contrast that.

Mostly in the Psalms and Proverbs. Can anybody quote a verse that has that kind of repetition in it? Or an idea being mentioned twice in a verse?

That's repetition, isn't it? And that's from a psalm. Verily, verily, I say. What about the parallelisms?

Can you think of a verse where you have the same idea stated twice? Yeah, that's a good example.

Good. Well, very good. Okay. Yeah, we could go on and on with that. But that's the kind of device that Hebrew poetry is so fond of giving.

[5 : 46] Well, God, by and large, used and still uses the writings of human beings to speak and give His message to other human beings.

Okay. He doesn't use angels. He doesn't sky write it across the sky. He uses people. And sometimes we forget this. We see the Bible as a miraculous book, as an infallible book, and so we should.

But never forget, there is a human element involved in that. Now, the Lord keeps that human element from going astray and saying something that He doesn't want it to say.

But still, it's a very human book. The book of Psalms is like that. It presents the emotional experience of God's people and also has a lot to say about the emotional makeup of our God, how He feels about things.

And of course, it is a window into the heart of Jesus Himself who often quotes the Psalms as His own experience. Well, the Psalter, the book of Psalms, is a compilation throughout the whole history of Israel used in their worship and used in the church's worship throughout the early years of the church, especially.

[7 : 09] And each of those songs is written by a human being with something important to say, both with His people and with His God. A large number of the Psalms also include the name of the author or authors of the Psalm and reveal the occasion for which they were written, like Psalm 34.

It was written at the occasion when David fled from the town of the Philistines after he had acted as a madman there. So, these titles are just as inspired as the words of the Psalm itself.

They appear in the original. And these poems, these songs, are usually written in the form of a praise or a prayer or a proclamation.

And often those forms are interspersed with each other. Many times the proclamations and the praises can lead us to prayer. And other times the prayers can lead to the praise and the proclamation.

Well, Psalm 119, I agree with C.H. Spurgeon on this, was written by King David. He writes, the fashion among modern writers is, as far as possible, to take every psalm from David.

[8 : 40] As the critics of this school are usually unsound in doctrine and unspiritual in tone, we, he and those like him, gravitate in the opposite direction.

We give credit to David for psalms that even sound like he wrote them. In other words, this is what he's saying about Psalm 119. We believe that David wrote this psalm.

It is Davidic in tone and expression and it tallies with David's experience in many interesting points. In our youth, our teacher, he said, called it David's pocketbook and we inclined to the opinion then expressed that here we have a royal diary written at various times throughout a long life.

No, we cannot give up this psalm to the enemy, he writes. This is David's spoil. After long reading, an author gets, an author, one gets to know his style and a measure of discernment is acquired by which his composition is detected even if his name is concealed.

So, holding David's authorship of this psalm may not be fully necessary and yet, when you read it, there are many terms and expressions in the psalm that appear in other psalms of David but don't appear anywhere else.

[10 : 14] And so, that's a good clue that this psalm was written by David and I've approached my own study of it, I've been teaching through it at the nursing home and I've approached it with his name and career in mind as the author and I've found that to be extremely rewarding.

Behind all the verses of the psalm of psalms as I've called it lies David's commitment to the absolute truth and the absolute goodness of his God Yahweh.

That name Yahweh translated as Lord all in capital letters is mentioned 24 times in this psalm. And Kevin Halloran writes, the purpose of this psalm is to celebrate God's word and instruction to his people.

It's used in Jewish tradition to celebrate Rosh Hashanah which is the Jewish New Year. This holiday is first a series of holidays called Yamim Noraim remember that it's going to be on the test or in English Days of Awe and it's fitting to use this psalm in that setting because the psalmist beautifully expresses awe and adoration of God for his word.

Here is one verse commonly used in this celebration. The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. That's verse 72.

[11 : 49] And what he calls adoration here could also be called delight. We're commanded in scripture to worship the Lord the beauty of holiness.

The splendor that causes us not only to revere and serve God but to adore him for his own sake and for the beauty of his words.

In Psalm 119 we hear again and again the author's utter trust and delight in the word of God. He refers to God's testimonies, his law, his precepts, his statutes, his commandments, his judgments, his ways, his promises, and his decrees and probably some other terms.

Okay, all these different terms give us different aspects of the word rather than making all of those terms woodenly synonymous.

I've chosen to look for subtle differences in those different terms referring to God's word for they can help us understand the overlying theme of each of these 22 stanzas.

[13 : 05] And each of the 22 stanzas has eight verses. One more than the perfect number. Eight verses. And each of those verses begins with the same Hebrew letter.

So we have an acrostic psalm, 22 stanzas, eight verses each, which is how many verses, mathematicians? 176.

Good, that was quick. So, every one of them is a rich, a beautiful patch of cloth woven together with all the rest.

They give an amazingly fashioned quilt and tapestry picturing the uniqueness, the grace, the majesty, the everlasting value, and the trustworthiness of the Word of God.

And God means for us not only to read it and be amazed and impressed with its beauty, but to find divine instruction and assurance in it, as well as trace the Father's plan of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[14 : 15] We see the face of Christ throughout this psalm in its many expressions of their love, of his love for the Father. So, let's get into the psalm itself now.

That was all introduction. Well, most of Psalm 119 could be considered a prayer directed toward God himself. It's interesting, though, that the first three verses only mention God indirectly.

If you look at those first three verses, you'll see that he is making a proclamation here. He's saying something about a certain type of person.

It reminds me a lot of Psalm 1. Turn to Psalm 1 quickly. Psalm 1 goes, Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.

That's the first verse of Psalm 1. Psalm 1 is also about the blessed people and it talks about what they're not like.

[15 : 34] Well, this psalm in the first three verses is mentioning what they are like. What does David say about these blessed people?

They're undefiled in the way. They walk in the law of the Lord. They keep his testimonies. They seek him with the whole heart.

They do no iniquity and they walk in his ways. And notice here how they walk and what they seek and do corresponds to what they keep.

Remember that word keep. It's going to be very important. So this description of the blessed ones gives us a wonderful overview of what the whole of Psalm 119 is all about and what its purpose is.

People are defiled by their sin and they need to be cleansed. People are lawless and need to learn to walk by God's rules.

[16 : 42] People are confused and they need to learn to trust God's testimonies. People lack purpose and need to seek God wholeheartedly.

People are rebellious and they need correction about their iniquity. People are going their own way to hell and need to be turned to walk in God's ways.

question what does the word blessed or blessed bring to your mind? Or what type of person?

Happy joyful if you're blessed you're happy and joyful what else does it bring to your mind? To be the envy of others.

they look upon your life being blessed or having that blessed quality. Abundance you're living an abundant life.

[17 : 49] Favored by God great. What scriptures does it bring to mind? Thanks I get it in stereo the beatitudes right?

Those who are following the Lord are blessed. There are at least two senses to that word blessed.

There's a sense in which it's a word about being and a word about becoming. Okay? There's a state of being that is blessed that is full that is complete.

The being of God for example is a blessed being. Okay? In need of nothing. He's totally complete in himself and a happy being.

Okay? And the other sense of the word is a condition that is given to someone. It's what someone becomes because of another.

[18 : 56] And a good example of this second sense of blessing is when Simon Bar-Jonah made the good confession about Christ and Jesus said, blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for man has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

Peter, in other words, had received a supernatural blessing. He couldn't take any credit for himself. Well, David is observing these people around him and he singles out those that he greatly admires when he begins this psalm.

Are these people sinlessly perfect? No. No. But he sees these people who day by day are living exemplary lives.

These people are making an honest effort to conduct themselves in the law of the Lord or by the commandments of Yahweh. What is God's way like?

Psalms 18 verse 30 says God's way is perfect. Right? And none of us are. Any sin, even small ones, brings defilement.

[20 : 25] So those who are undefiled, David writes and observes, are blessed. They are the ones living the good life, the happy life.

Now notice there is a difference between these blessed ones and people like the Pharisees who are hoping to earn their way into God's favor.

The ones David admires are seeking God with the whole heart. He can tell there is a spiritual quality to their obedience.

Not just a fleshly motive. Like trying to earn salvation or to earn the respect of others, to be seen by others, or trying to buy God off by grudgingly following His rules like the older brother who remained in the father's house.

people he sees have an undivided heart. They make their choice and pledge their allegiance to God's word.

[21 : 30] They're like Abraham who obeyed God to the point of sacrificing his own son even though it was the hardest thing he ever did.

He was sold out. He had an undivided heart. Well, these are the men and women that David is inspired by.

That David wants to be like. Time and again we'll notice in Psalm 119 the word keep being used.

And I ask you to keep that word in mind. We have to see this term keeping the word, keeping the testimonies, going beyond mere wooden obedience, dutiful obedience, obeying the letter of the law.

Those who keep God's testimonies look upon those words of Yahweh as treasured possessions. They treasure those words.

[22 : 38] To keep something is to keep it close, to treasure it, not to let it get away. When they hear a familiar verse or passage, they won't be thinking, yeah, yeah, I've heard that before, let's move on to something I haven't heard.

It'll be more like a favorite jewel that they get out of their display case and they look at it, they appreciate it for its beauty and the many colors of light.

It'll be a treasured keepsake like a love letter or a handwritten recipe from your grandparents. Anybody have some of those? Something you never want to lose.

People who keep God's testimonies in that way are blessed by the Lord because their hearts belong to Him. They are His people.

So remember that word keep as it comes up again and again. verse 4, next David begins addressing the Lord directly.

- [23 : 48] Here he is halfway through almost. You have commanded us to keep your precepts diligently. Oh, that my ways were directed to keep your statutes.
- I've heard that often in the Psalms we find the key thought or theme not at the beginning or at the end but right in the middle.
- And I think these two verses, number 4 and 5, express the Psalmist's key theme about this Aleph stanza. The stanza beginning with the Hebrew Aleph.
- And I put that theme in these words, longing to be like the blessed ones who walk in God's ways. This first stanza sets the tone for the rest of the Psalm.
- This is a longing of David's heart. Now the words precepts and statutes are both rules for behavior. But a precept is a lesson for conduct conduct that is usually taught orally.
- [25 : 03] Such as the rules you give your little kids. Okay? You need to be unselfish. You need to share with your brother or sister. Okay? You need to pick up your toys.
- Those kinds of things are precepts, you know, tell the truth. Things we learn at our mother's knee. A statute, on the other hand, is more formal.
- Usually written down. It comes from a legislative entity or a governing body. They're written down. In Isaiah 28, God tells his people that his teaching must come to them precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little, like one teaching a weaned child.
- child. This is also a theme David uses throughout Psalm 119, his desire to be schooled in the classroom of the Lord.
- This is his great longing and his aspiration. And it's how he conducts his life. You know, we're told in the law, in Deuteronomy, that it's the king's duty, not only to hear and to read the word of God, but to copy out the word of God.
- [26 : 29] The king was supposed to write out his own personal copy of the word as given to him by the priests. And I believe David probably practiced this.
- How much more do we treasure the memory of being taught by a loving parent, than by some stranger, just laying down the rules? David addresses Yahweh directly here for the first time.
- You have commanded us to keep your precepts diligently. The word us is supplied there by the translator.
- It doesn't appear in the original. So we could just as soon substitute the word me there. you have commanded me to keep your precepts diligently.
- He's saying your command to me is to treasure and obey every little childhood lesson coming from your loving mouth, to be diligent about it.
- [27 : 35] And he knew if he did that, he'd be like those blessed ones who do no iniquity. Verse 3.
- They do no iniquity. If they're loving, if they're keeping his commands, walking in his law. Some of the more modern translations leave out the word OH.
- But that's in the original, the interjection AHALAY in Hebrew. Hebrew. That word OH. Like he's got a stomach ache.
- You know, OH. He feels it in his bones. This is the heart cry of the psalmist. And here it's in the heart of the stanza.
- He sees these supernaturally blessed people who walk in God's ways and he longs to have his own ways directed to keep.
- [28 : 41] Again, there's that word. To keep. Not only God's childhood lessons and rules, precepts, but his legislated and written codes of conduct, his statutes.

He wants to go that far. He wants to grow up in his obedience. So many folks are content with just letting your conscience be your guide.

Like Jiminy Cricket said to Pinocchio in the old movie. They might know many of God's precepts that they learned at their mother's knee like honesty and parental obedience and fair play and maybe even the golden rule.

Maybe they know that. Because they're well known in the person's home or in the culture. But it takes a supernatural blessing from the Holy Spirit for a person to really delight in and treasure to keep every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Every word. His written word, his testimonies, his statutes. They are all wonderful words of life. Words of the good life.

[30 : 01] Words of the blessed life. You know, the false statement or the false idea has spread far and wide among so-called Christians today that we're not really bound by the commandments of God.

That we can pick and choose even the Ten Commandments. It's said that because Jesus died on the cross to pay for all our sins and we have our fire insurance, we're all forgiven, right?

So why worry about becoming more holy in our behavior? Well, this is far from the view of both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

What does the Apostle Paul write in Romans 6.1? What shall we say then? Shall we continue in that grace may abound?

Of course not. On the contrary, Paul writes in Ephesians 2, by grace you have been saved through faith, that not of yourselves, it's the gift of God, not of works that no one can boast.

[31 : 16] For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand for us to do.

doing good works, doing good deeds, obeying God's law, in other words, is never the basis of our salvation. But obedience is the inevitable fruit of true saving faith.

Holy behavior is the goal and the reason God chooses to save us. Because He wants us to be blessed. because He wants us to have that abundant life and that eternal life.

He chose believers out of this sinful world to reflect His perfection and to give Him glory.

The converted heart of the true Christian desires this perfection and delights in His law. He obeys out of gratitude for God's love and forgiveness.

[32 : 31] He's thinking, if there's anything I can do to show my gratitude to You, Lord, I want to do it. David, just like you and I, was saved by grace.

How many gospels are there? There's only one. By grace through faith. Through faith in the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ, He was saved.

But the new heart granted to Him by Yahweh expresses a deep desire to become like the blessed ones He so deeply admires for their faithful walk in the ways of the Lord.

He makes sure to point out that those blessed ones are doing it with a whole heart. They're holding nothing back. They're not just paying the bare minimum.

They're going beyond. Like the older son in the parable, they're not just obeying out of drudgery and mere obligation.

[33 : 37] Rather, the ones He admires are keeping God's statutes while seeking God with all their heart. When Adam and Eve, we're going on to verse six now, when Adam and Eve first disobeyed, their first act following their sin was to cover themselves.

They were ashamed of their nakedness. They felt vulnerable both before one another and before the God who created them. Shame is actually a great gift from our Maker.

It's the sense that it is not okay to do what is wrong and unlawful in His sight. The awareness of impending judgment. That's shame.

Knowing what we deserve. We deserve to be paid back for our disobedience. We'll see in Psalm 119 that David takes God's judgments very seriously.

He talks about them a lot. People today want to get rid of the Ten Commandments. Why? Because it reminds them of how sinful they really are and liable for judgment.

[34 : 47] David, however, longs for the good life, the undefiled life, a life full of blessedness and free from guilt and shame.

He wants to avoid that. Even the slightest hint of shame in his heart he wants to avoid. Then verse 7, we move from the longing of his soul through the expectation of a conscience freed from shame.

We come to the resolution of praise. Here he's resolving he's going to praise the Lord, honor God with his upright, guilt-freed heart by giving a sacrifice of worship and praise.

We'll meet this phrase, your righteous judgments, again and again in Psalm 119. As a child of Yahweh, adopted through the work of the coming Messiah, David has nothing to fear from those righteous judgments.

He knows he's a sinner, he knows that he deserves God's wrath, God's punishment, but he knows that God is faithful, that God is merciful, that God does not impute his sin to him.

[36 : 12] How does he know that? Because he knows God's promise of a Redeemer who's coming. He writes in Psalm 32 verse 2, Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes not iniquity.

In other words, God imputes our iniquity to another. The sins of God's children are all imputed to Jesus Christ on the cross instead.

Therefore, he has no need to fear these righteous judgments. He extols them, he praises them. I will keep your statutes, he says.

Oh, do not forsake me utterly. Now, this is a somewhat puzzling ending to this stanza. Now, is he moving from praise to terror of being forsaken by God?

I don't think so. Rather, I think David is pleading with the Lord not to leave him on his own to carry this out. He knows his own heart.

[37 : 23] He knows how, he's not naive, he knows how prone he is to wander from the Lord's commands, from even his precepts.

David is pleading for the Lord not to leave him alone with his good intentions, as if all he needed to do was turn over a new leaf, or write a new year's resolution.

His desire is to be like those blessed ones he admires, and he knows that their trust is not in themselves. They're walking in God's ways.

They're trusting his word. So David's being honest here, both with God and with his own soul. He's asking the Lord not to be very far away.

That's what the word utterly means, to be very far away. He says, Lord, I want to obey, but I need to know you're going to be around in case I mess up.

[38 : 27] I need to lean on you. I'm not obeying in a vacuum. I have enemies outside and inside my own flesh.

We'll see in future stanzas that David's not naive about his own ability to be faithful. It's the awareness of and the trust in the presence and power and promises of Yahweh that encourage King David to treasure and obey the word of God, even in the face of affliction and persecution.

We'll see a lot of that in this psalm. Stanza Aleph gives the reader a lofty goal to be like the blessed ones whose hearts long after the undefiled life, walking in the way of God's commands, treasuring his every word.

Is such a goal your goal? Is it mine? We'll discover in the weeks to come that it is certainly David's goal and it was certainly the goal of our Lord Jesus Christ who obeyed totally undefiled in his life and offered that life up as a sacrifice for his people.

And he told us, if you love me, what? keep my commandments. So that's the beginning of Psalm 119, the Psalm of Psalms.

[40 : 07] God bless you. We're dismissed. from vorher to heaven. Vatican 31 cannot not Vanguard percent, no fact of recovery, the hag fund thou in