

The Middle of Your Bible and the Centre of Your Life

Psalm 119

If you browse the self-help section at a bookstore, or even online, you will soon find a trend. You'll find plenty of titles like "Change Your Life in Three Easy Steps"; 'Revolutionize Your Business in With Five Handy Tips' "Transform Your Body in 30 Days" "Love in 90 Days - The Essential Guide to Finding Your Own True Love". Titles like these are obviously a hard sell, publishers trying to make money through book sales. Living in a consumerist culture, we all recognise that. But what is more interesting, and perhaps less noticeable to us, is why our world would find those titles attractive. Why do titles that promise great results with a minimum of time and effort seem really inviting to us? It's not just laziness, which is as old as Eden. Our culture has become increasingly impatient, restless, and distracted. We are being shaped to expect instant everything: instant search results, instant driving directions, instant purchases. Slowly, without you noticing it, you are being shaped to expect that everything you want should be like the click of a mouse, and nearly as fast.

Unscrupulous pastors could exploit this trend with sermon titles like "Renovate Your Christian Life With Two Simple Techniques" or "The Christian Life You've Always Wanted in Two Weeks". But they would be misleading you. Because knowing and loving God, living the Christian life is not a matter of a few quick techniques here and there. It is a lifelong marathon of steady sowing of good works, repeating our worship, maintaining lifelong spiritual disciplines, walking with God. You cannot cram, or hack, or manipulate the Holy Spirit to give you twice the godliness in half the time.

Having said that, there is one thing that comes close to something that can revolutionise a Christian life. It is not a simple step, or a hack, or clever technique. But this one thing, when applied, and applied steadily, will transform any Christian and accelerate your growth. So, if I were going to honestly, and responsibly title this sermon series, it could be: Transform Your Christian Life With One Consistently Applied Step. I know this because the Bible consistently teaches this. And I know this from my own experience at having applied it.

That step, or approach, or posture is the one found in Psalm 119, in the middle of your Bible. The longest chapter in the Bible, perhaps fittingly provides you with the step. So if you thought it was going to be a quick and easy, the length of Psalm 119 is meant to disabuse you of that. It contains 176 verses (about the same length as the book of Ruth, or James, or Philipians) in 22 stanzas of eight verses each or sections. Each of those twenty-two begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet, so that each of the eight verses begins with that letter. If you were translating that, it would mean you'd begin verse 1 through 8 with a word beginning with A, and then from verse 9 to 17, each verse would begin with the letter B. This is known as an acrostic psalm, and the reason for doing it is to memorise it. Yes, it is very likely that many of the ancient Hebrews memorised Psalm 119. So have people in more modern times: the great abolitionist William Wilberforce, the missionary to India Henry Martyn, pioneer missionary David Livingstone, the philosopher Blaise Pascal all memorised this psalm.

What is obvious about Psalm 119 is that it is about the Word of God. Of the 176 verses, 171 explicitly mention God's Word. But it is not simply about God's Word; it is about the believer's relationship to God's Word. How the believer views God's Word, how he responds to God's Word, what he prays for regarding God's Word, this adds up to the believer's relationship to God. That's the one great, revolutionary lesson of the psalm. It is said in 176 ways, but it comes back to one idea: a believer's relationship to God's Words is the believer's relationship to God. That is the one step that can revolutionise your Christian life.

Most of this psalm comes in three forms: the psalmist telling us of his attitude to the Word, the

psalmist telling us of his actions towards the Word, and the psalmist asking God for grace in the Word. It is entirely about the believer's relationship to God through his relationship to the Word.

There isn't a single command given to us in the psalm. It is entirely testimonial, a believer telling us what the saved, regenerate life is supposed to be. It is a mini-theology of the Christian life. Psalm 119 is what we call a wisdom psalm, rather like reading Proverbs. It tells us what ought to be, what is best, from the first-person perspective of a fervent, zealous believer.

We don't know who this believer was, for the Psalm is anonymous. Many have said it was David, (Spurgeon thought so), others have suggested Ezra, and one suggests it was Daniel. But the fact that it is anonymous perhaps makes it easier for us to apply his secret to each of our lives, to fill our names into the testimony of this psalm.

My approach in this series is not going to be to preach verse-by-verse through every stanza. Instead, I want to us to draw out from the psalm the main repeated ideas: first, the attributes of God's Word - what God's Word is and does; then next week, what a believer's attitude should be towards it, and finally what a believer's actions should be towards it.

Let me encourage you to read through this Psalm at least once a week in one sitting. It will take you fifteen minutes. Perhaps at other times, take a stanza or two. We will read through it as a congregation through these three weeks. Let the repetition soak into you. Let the song do its work on you as you hear how a believer relates to God's Word.

Today, I want us to understand what Psalm 119 teaches about the Word itself. What the Word is, and what the Word does. If you really understand what the Bible is, and how it can change your Christian life, it will very likely change your attitude to it and your actions toward it.

I. Your Encounter with the Word is Your Encounter With God

Righteous are You, O LORD, And upright are Your judgments. Your testimonies, which You have commanded, Are righteous and very faithful. My zeal has consumed me, Because my enemies have forgotten Your words. Your word is very pure; Therefore Your servant loves it. I am small and despised, Yet I do not forget Your precepts. Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, And Your law is truth. Trouble and anguish have overtaken me, Yet Your commandments are my delights. The righteousness of Your testimonies is everlasting; Give me understanding, and I shall live. (119:137-144)

The psalmist has eight terms he uses for God's Word. By the way, the number eight is all over the psalm, every stanza has eight verses, the believer has eight responsibilities. Eight is the number of new beginnings, of resurrection, and of abundance. In the background, the writer is saying, God's Word is sufficient and more than enough to give you life and life more abundantly.

Throughout the psalm, he refers to God's written word with eight words. Each of these terms gives us a slightly different flavour of meaning to show what God's Word is.

- 1) Word (davar), 24 times: It is simply His speech, His communication.
- 2) Sayings (imrah), 19 times: again, Gods speech, whatever He promises or commands.
- 3) Statutes (chuqqim), 21 times: But it is also His will, the rules and standards that please Him.
- 4) Judgements (mishpatim), 23 times. His judgement as to what is good and true and beautiful and what is not.
- 5) Law (torah), 25 times. This is a technical Word for what was originally the first five books of Moses, later on, it more loosely referred to other writings by the prophets. It is His covenant with both promises and laws, warnings and threats.
- 6) Commands (mitzvot), 22 times. These are orders that the King gives to us.

7) Precepts (piqqudim), 21 times. Guidelines, wisdom to know what to do in all of life.
8) Testimonies (edoth). It is guidelines and instructions. But put them all together and you have something wondrous: personal communication from the mind of God to the mind of man. The Creator who made both man and gave man the power of language, put into words who He is, what He intends to do, what He desires, how we should respond.

But even though the psalmist refers to God's Word 178 times using these eight terms, here is what is remarkable. Weaved into the psalm seamlessly are references to God Himself: His ways, His name, His mercies, His favour. So seamless and inseparable are these verses that they completely blend into the other verses about God's Word.

Notice how God Himself and God's Word are almost identical to the psalmist:

¹⁵ I will meditate on Your precepts, And contemplate Your ways. (Psalm 119:15)

⁴¹Let Your mercies come also to me, O LORD—Your salvation according to Your word.

⁵⁵ I remember Your name in the night, O LORD, And I keep Your law. (Psalm 119:55)

⁷⁶ Let, I pray, Your merciful kindness be for my comfort, According to Your word to Your servant. (Psalm 119:76)

⁸⁹Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness *endures* to all generations; You established the earth, and it abides. (Psalm 119:89–90)

¹²⁰ My flesh trembles for fear of You, And I am afraid of Your judgments. (Psalm 119:120)

¹³⁷Righteous *are* You, O LORD, And upright *are* Your judgments.

He also calls the Word by descriptions that belong to God. He calls it an inheritance or portion (111), He calls it a friend and counselor (24). He calls it the subject of his songs (54). He calls it the light and lamp of his life (105, 130). He calls it the greatest treasure of his life. (*vv. 14, 72, 127, 162*).

For the psalmist, there is no difference between God Himself, and what God has spoken. To hear or read God's Words is to encounter God Himself: God's will, God's ways, God's purposes, God's desires, God's promises. The Bible is not some second-hand, twice-removed, distant cousin of God Himself. The Bible is not a 3000 year-old broken telephone remnant of something God may have said. God's Word is God's Voice.

The living God is fundamentally a God who speaks in words. He does not mime, or gesture, or draw to reveal Himself. Yes, God is the Painter Supreme: look at the sunsets and the galaxies. Yes, God is the sculptor without peer, look at the mountain ranges and canyons. Yes, God is the Composer extraordinaire: listen to the symphonic sounds on his creatures and creation. But these still pale in their clarity when it comes to what reveals God. God reveals Himself in words, in language, in speech.

God has not revealed Himself in pictures. God did not choose the visual as the medium to reveal Himself. God chose the verbal medium, the linguistic medium. The greatest form of that speech was His Son who came to us teaching and speaking and explaining.

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds;(Hebrews 1:1–2)

God is revealed in the Son (John 1:18, Col 1:15). It is no accident, and not a mere coincidence that the apostle John refers to Jesus, the Son, as the Word. Jesus is the Living Word, the living communication of God. "Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and *the one* to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matt 11:27) When Jesus came and lived amongst us, we had God speaking and explaining Himself. If you want to know God, you must know the Son. He is the mediator of God and man, and no one comes to the Father except through Him.

But Jesus could only come once in time and space. And if you had to be there in A.D. 33 to hear God's Word, then it would limit God's speaking revelation to a small number of people living in Israel. So the Living Word is revealed in the written Word, from Genesis to Revelation, a timeless book available to all peoples. The whole book is Messianic, about Messiah. Jesus The Son is revealed in the Word by the Spirit. Jesus spoke about the things "were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me." (Luke 24:44)

We can say it this way: Jesus, the Living Word is the mediator of God, and the Bible, the written Word, is the mediator of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. To read the Word is to read the Son, read the Messiah. It is to take in the very communication of the Holy Spirit.

The Son is the Mediator. The Word is the mediator of the mediator, if you wish. Your encounter with the Word is your encounter with God.

Many Christians respect the Bible, they honour the Bible, but they are not fully convinced that the Word is where they will meet and encounter and know God. They think Bible reading is a kind of healthy habit to add to your Christian life, like church going. But they have never really understood that it is in God's Words that God is seen, known, loved and experienced. In Christianity, we see with our ears. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing of the word of Christ. We see God by hearing, reading, listening to His verbal communication of Himself.

Maybe that's you. You agree that the Bible is important, but you think communing with God, knowing God happens primarily in some other way. Maybe prayer. Indeed, that is where you commune with God, but what can you say to Him except what He has revealed to you in His Word? Unless you pray through the person of Jesus, revealed in the Word, for things according to God's will (revealed in the Word), trusting in promises (revealed in the Word), you have nothing to say. Real prayer is God's Word prayed back to Him. D. L. Moody said, "In our prayers we talk to God, in the Bible God talks to us, and we had better let God do most of the talking." If you struggle to pray, it may be that you have little of God's Word abiding in you, so you have little to say.

Maybe you feel communion with God is in listening to impressions, fleeting thoughts, whims, feelings, thinking that they represent God speaking to you. Proverbs 28:26 says, "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool" . But why should God speak in ways so ambiguous, so whimsical, so fickle, so liable to misunderstanding, when He has committed His Word to language, to print? If you were sitting down to hear the last will and testament of a relative, would you prefer the lawyer read a written document to you, or use mental telepathy, as you try to intuit in your heart what the will said? Any inner impression in your heart that is used by the Spirit will be His own words, which is, the Word of God.

Perhaps someone thinks that coming to church is where you will truly know God. Indeed, corporate worship is where we should know and love God best. But what do we do when we worship rightly? We read the Word publicly, we sing hymns and songs and psalms filled with the Word, we pray prayers saturated with the Word, we partake of the Lord's Supper as commanded in the Word, and we preach and teach the Word.

Maybe someone says, I know God best when in nature, when by the sea, or by towering mountains,

or the beautiful bushveld. Yes, you can indeed experience God when seeing His works, but how do you know what those works reveal without the Word? Many a Darwinist or atheist looks at the same things and does not worship. The Word gives you the interpretation of God's works: who made it, why. It is when verses about creation flood your mind while you look at creation that you are truly worshipping.

You cannot separate knowing and loving God from His inspired Word. Your encounter with the Word is your encounter with God.

Perhaps someone says, "Are you really telling me that to know the God who made the galaxies, I must open the pages of a book?" Well, that question shows you have mistaken the technology or the medium for the actual message. A book is just a tool, a technology we use to communicate words. Before the technology of books there was inscribed pottery, and then papyrus, and later vellum (leather) sheets, and then paper. These were technologies used to transmit words, not the words themselves. The printing press gave us books, and the Bible is the most printed book in history. But printing is being replaced by digital media, and now you could ask the same foolish question this way: "Are you really telling me that to know the God who made the galaxies, I must read text on a screen?" The issue is not the screen, the device, the book, the ink, the pages. Those are media, tools, ways to get words from speaker to listener or reader. The issue is the words. Whether you listen to the Bible on audiobook, hear it read to you at church, read it on a phone, a page, or a laptop screen, the important thing is the actual words of God. And the Bible contains the God-breathed out, living words of the living God.

We don't worship a book. We worship a God who has revealed Himself in words. The collection of those words is called the Bible. As Spurgeon said, "To me, the Bible is not God, but it is God's voice, and I do not hear it without awe".

Where are you looking for God? Where are you seeking God? If you seek Him where He has not promised to be found, you cannot be surprised if you do not find Him. Your relationship to the Word, your interest, your intake, your time, your retention, your application is your interest in God. Let's put it another way. To ask the question, "How diligently did you seek God last year?" is the same question as "How diligently were you taking in the Word last year?" What is God's Word? It is God's communication of Himself and therefore your encounter with the Word is your encounter with God.