

Psalm 119

For our final lesson on the Psalms we are going to take a look at Psalm 119. This psalm is the longest chapter in the book of Psalms, and is the longest chapter in the entire Bible. It has a staggering 176 verses. As you might imagine, you could spend a very long time investigating this psalm. Since we only have one lesson, we are going to go over it fairly quickly.

One key fact to know about this psalm is that it is *not* a series of 176 random verses. If you look at your Bible you will see that it is actually composed of 22 sections of 8 verses each. Each of those 22 sections is labeled with a different Hebrew letter – aleph, beth, gimel, etc. What this is trying to communicate is that each verse in each of those sections starts with that particular letter. For example, the 8 verses in the “Aleph” section all start with the letter aleph, and the 8 verses in the “Beth” section all start with the letter beth, and so forth. That means that Psalm 119 is actually an acrostic psalm. (This is not the only passage in the Bible that is like this; part of Proverbs 31 is also an acrostic.)

Due to time constraints it simply isn't possible to take a look at all 22 sections in a single lesson. However, we are going to study what we can in the time that we have. This psalm has a theme – in fact, it has several themes. Let's take a look at the sections and see what we can discover.

Aleph – The Beginning

The psalm begins by telling us that God blesses those who keep His Word:

[Slide 1]

Psalm 119:1: “Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord.

2 Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart.”

The section of Aleph ends with the psalmist promising to keep God's Word:

[Still slide 1]

Psalm 119:8: “I will keep thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly.”

The message here is very straightforward: God blesses those who keep His commandments and walk in His ways. Obedience is a central part of being blessed. Therefore, the psalmist promises to keep God's Law and do God's will.

Beth – Sanctification

The next section tells us that keeping God's commandments leads to sanctification:

[Slide 2]

Psalm 119:9: “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word.”

Psalm 119:11: “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”

How do you achieve sanctification? How do you learn to change your ways and lead a holy life? By memorizing the Word of God and keeping the Lord's commandments. If you do that then you will cleanse your way. If you do that then you will change and will learn to not sin against God.

Therefore, the psalmist closes the Beth section by making a promise:

[Slide 3]

Psalm 119:16: “I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word.”

The psalmist promises to delight himself in the Word of God and to memorize it so that he will not sin against the Lord. Aleph has told us that obedience to God's Word brings blessings; Beth has told us that it brings sanctification and a changed life. Let's see what is next.

Gimel – Pilgrims

The section of Gimel tells us that we are strangers and pilgrims in this world:

[Slide 4]

Psalm 119:19: “I am a stranger in the earth: hide not thy commandments from me.”

In fact, not only are we strangers, but it seems that we are in enemy territory:

[Still slide 4]

Psalm 119:23: “Princes also did sit and speak against me: but thy servant did meditate in thy statutes.”

Now we are starting to see the journey. In Aleph we saw a new Christian come to know the Lord and rejoice in His commandments. In Beth the Christian begins to study the Word, memorize it, and apply it to his life. The process of sanctification is beginning. In Gimel, however, the new Christian learns that the world is no longer his friend. He is now a stranger in a strange land. The world is against him – but all is not lost. He has a plan:

[Slide 5]

Psalm 119:24: “Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counselors.”

What does this Christian do when people speak against him? He delights himself in God's Word. He goes to the Word to find comfort and counseling. He lets the Word guide him.

Let's see what happens next.

Daleth – Affliction

Not only do princes speak against him, but life becomes even harder. In Daleth the new Christian is grievously afflicted:

[Slide 6]

Psalm 119:25: "My soul cleaveth unto the dust: quicken thou me according to thy word."

Daleth is a period of great suffering. The Christian's soul is persecuted and troubled:

[Still slide 6]

Psalm 119:28: "My soul melteth for heaviness: strengthen thou me according unto thy word."

In this time of trouble, where does the Christian run to strength? The Word of God. The persecution does not cause him to run *from* God; instead it causes him to run *to* God and to the words that God has given to him in the Scriptures. In fact, the trials of Daleth lead the Christian to ask for grace so that he might stand strong and walk in God's ways:

[Slide 7]

Psalm 119:32: "I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart."

The Christian has not wavered; instead he seeks grace.

He – Desires

In the section of He, the Christian battles his own desires. He seeks to abandon his former loves and instead learn to delight in the things of God:

[Slide 8]

Psalm 119:36: "Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness.
37 Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way."

The book of I John commands us to love not the world, for the things of this world are not the things of God. Those who are in love with the world are not in love with God, because this world is the enemy of God and the enemy of God's disciples. This Christian has come to understand that concept and seeks to change his desires. He doesn't want to long after worldly things anymore; instead he wants to delight himself in the Word.

In the past he longed for carnal things. Now he longs for something very different:

[Still slide 8]

Psalm 119:40: “Behold, I have longed after thy precepts: quicken me in thy righteousness.”

In Beth we were told that memorizing the Word and learning to walk in its ways would further the process of sanctification. In this section we see that this is coming true: the Word is changing the Christian's desires. He doesn't want the same things he used to; now he seeks the things of God. The Christian is being transformed.

Waw – Testimony

In the section of Waw we see that people are questioning the Christian's beliefs:

[Slide 9]

Psalm 119:42: “So shall I have wherewith to answer him that reproacheth me: for I trust in thy word.”

There comes a time in everyone's life when they are asked to defend what they believe. Why does this Christian believe as he does? Why isn't he like the world? Why does he stand with God and do what is right? The Christian needs to have an answer – and since he has spent his time delighting in the Word of God, he has that answer. Since he trusts in the Word, he is able to answer those who attack him and demand a reason. Even if he is arrested and made to stand before rulers, he can still answer with confidence:

[Slide 10]

Psalm 119:46: “I will speak of thy testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed.”

The section of Waw ends with the psalmist explaining the secret to his boldness and confidence:

[Still slide 10]

Psalm 119:48: “My hands also will I lift up unto thy commandments, which I have loved; and I will meditate in thy statutes.”

This Christian loves the Word. He has studied it and he continues to meditate upon it. He has hidden it in his heart. When he is questioned he knows what to say. When he is attacked he has a ready defense. When the world comes against him he runs to the Word of God.

It's worth noting that this Christian doesn't use clever arguments or worldly tricks. He doesn't try to impress anyone with his brilliance; instead he answers his opponents with the Word. He is not ashamed of the gospel, for he knows it is the power of God.

Zayin – Derision

In Waw we saw that the Christian used the Word to answer his accusers. If this was a movie then his accusers would have seen the error of their ways and would now be Christians. However, the real world isn't always like that. Even though the Christian has answered them and preached the Word to them, his life has not improved. He is still afflicted:

[Slide 11]

Psalm 119:50: "This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me.

51 The proud have had me greatly in derision: yet have I not declined from thy law."

The world has not become any nicer to him; instead he is held in great derision. In the Christian's time of distress, where does he find his comfort? In the Word. It is the Word that tells him how much God loves him, and that God has promised him everlasting life and joy. It is the Word that tells him the fate of the righteous – and the fate of the wicked:

[Slide 11]

Psalm 119:53: "Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law."

The wicked may be in power, but the Christian is not tempted by their temporal success. He knows the fate of the wicked and he knows the judgment that is coming against them, and he is filled with horror at their sins. The Christian's time in the Word is paying off; he has learned a great deal and it is sustaining him. In fact, Zayin tells us that the Word has become his song:

[Slide 12]

Psalm 119:54: "Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage."

When the world is in trouble it has many different ways to find peace and happiness – but none of those can bring the peace that passes understanding. When the Christian is in trouble, though, he knows exactly what to do. Zayin tells us that he goes to the Word to find comfort and song.

Heth – Trials

We have seen that the Christian has sought to walk in God's ways. He has delighted in the Word of God and has done what is right. He has even testified before rulers and preached the gospel to them! So how is he rewarded? Well, people who preach the prosperity gospel will tell you that the gospel brings health and wealth to all men. But that is simply not true. The Christian has done all the right things, but the world has only oppressed him still further:

[Slide 13]

Psalm 119:61: "The bands of the wicked have robbed me: but I have not forgotten thy law."

Heth tells us that the world has gone beyond just scoffing and deriding the Christian. It is now actively robbing him. The Christian's possessions are being stolen from him. His faith is costing him something.

So what does the Christian do? He finds his treasure elsewhere:

[Still slide 13]

Psalm 119:57: "Thou art my portion, O Lord: I have said that I would keep thy words."

The world seeks silver and gold and fame and fortune; they seek worldly treasure. The Christian is different. The world can take his money, for that is not his wealth. The Lord is his portion and his treasure, and the Word is his delight. When the Christian's possessions are taken from him, he turns to the Lord and delights himself in God. Instead of bewailing what he has lost, he actually *gives thanks*:

[Slide 14]

Psalm 119:62: "At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee because of thy righteous judgments."

These trials do not drive him from God; instead they drive him closer to God. They teach him to love God's Word even more than he did before. When everything is lost and it seems that nothing is left, you learn what it truly means to have the Lord for your portion and the Lord for your riches. God is ever faithful, and He has given to His children a wealth that the world will never have. The Christian delights in the salvation that God has given to him and rejoices.

Teth – Hidden Blessings

Most people hate to be persecuted. They hate affliction and pain and suffering, and they would *much* rather be happy. In Heth we saw that the Christian was grievously afflicted; he has suffered time and time again and has lost a great deal. In Teth we would expect the Christian to complain about the things that God has allowed to happen to him, but that's not what we find. Instead the Christian sees these events as a *blessing* instead of a curse:

[Slide 15]

Psalm 119:67: "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word."

It seems that all of this suffering has actually brought the Christian closer to God. Before the time of trial came, the Christian had started to drift away from the Word. He had started to live more like the world – but the suffering brought him closer to God and back to the Word. Therefore, because of this, the Christian is thankful for the trouble he faced:

[Still slide 15]

Psalm 119:71: "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes."

That's a remarkable thing to say, isn't it? In Teth the Christian doesn't complain about being afflicted; instead he is grateful for it because it has taught him the commands of God. The Christian loves the Word and therefore loves anything that brings him closer to the Word. If affliction is what it takes to bring him closer to God then the Christian is grateful for it. His desire truly is for the Word, even if it costs him something. The psalmist ends this section by saying that the Word means more to him than immense worldly riches:

[Slide 16]

Psalm 119:72: "The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver."

The Christian says that the world can have its silver and gold; what the Christian wants is the Word of God.

Yod – Understanding

In Yod the Christian shows a deep understanding of theology. He first tells us that God was the one who made him:

[Slide 17]

Psalm 119:73: "Thy hands have made me and fashioned me: give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments."

The Christian then acknowledges that *God* was the one who has been afflicting him:

[Still slide 17]

Psalm 119:75: "I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me."

This brings to mind the book of Job. In that book the righteous Job was grievously afflicted. He lost his wealth, his children, and his health – and he lost it all because God removed His hedge of protection from him and allowed the devil to afflict him. Job knew that God had allowed these things to happen and was very upset with God. Job was certain that God had wronged him and wanted to talk to God and set him straight. As it turned out, though, *Job* was the one who was wrong. He should have trusted the Lord instead of accusing Him.

The Christian in Yod does not make the same mistake that Job did. He truly *does* trust the Lord. Even though the Lord is afflicting him, the Christian continues to trust in God. He does this because he knows the Word, and the Word has told him that God is perfect and righteous in all He does. Since the Christian knows that all of God's judgments are right, he trusts God and accepts all that God gives to him – even if it is affliction. When he is afflicted he goes to the Lord for comfort:

[Slide 18]

Psalm 119:76: "Let, I pray thee, thy merciful kindness be for my comfort, according to thy word unto thy servant."

The Christian doesn't run from God in times of suffering. Instead he understands that God was allowing that time of suffering to come, that God intends the suffering for good and not evil, and that God is righteous in all that He does. He therefore goes to God for mercy and comfort, knowing that God will give him the strength he needs to get through these difficult times.

The Christian ends the section of Yod with a special request:

[Still slide 18]

Psalm 119:80: "Let my heart be sound in thy statutes; that I be not ashamed."

What the Christian asks is that, in his great time of suffering, God would give him the grace *to keep God's commandments*. The Christian seeks *obedience*. He wants to do what is right so that he will not sin and become ashamed. That's a remarkable thing to pray for in a time of suffering, isn't it?

Kaph – Grace

In the section of Yod the Christian acknowledges that God is behind his afflictions, and he asks the Lord to comfort and strengthen him. In the section of Kaph we find that things have become much *worse*:

[Slide 19]

Psalm 119:82: "Mine eyes fail for thy word, saying, When wilt thou comfort me?
83 For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget thy statutes."

In Yod the psalmist asked God for comfort – but comfort has not come. The psalmist is still waiting. He is still in a great deal of pain. The wicked are persecuting him and they are getting away with it:

[Still slide 19]

Psalm 119:84: "How many are the days of thy servant? when wilt thou execute judgment on them that persecute me?
85 The proud have digged pits for me, which are not after thy law."

The Christian asked for comfort but comfort did not come. He asked for help, but instead of help he received more persecution. The psalmist is now wondering how much longer he has to live before the wicked take his very life from him. He is in tremendous danger:

[Slide 20]

Psalm 119:87: "They had almost consumed me upon earth; but I forsook not thy precepts."

The Christian seems to be near death at this point. The wicked are persecuting him and have come after him, and he is almost consumed. The comfort that he prayed for has not come, and he has not been delivered from the wicked. The wicked seem to have the upper hand.

So how does the Christian end this section? With an unexpected request:

[Still slide 20]

Psalm 119:88: "Quicken me after thy lovingkindness; so shall I keep the testimony of thy mouth."

In the Christian's hour of great need, when all seems lost and death seems near, the Christian asks for grace *so that he can keep God's commandments*. Even in this time of great pain, the Christian's primary focus is holiness! His great concern is that he would be given strength to walk in God's ways in spite of the great distress he is in. He doesn't want to sin and disobey God. Above everything else, he wants to walk in the Word – so that is what he prays for.

Lamedh – Deliverance

In Kaph we saw that things were looking very dire for the Christian – but in Lamedh things change. The Christian has found deliverance at last:

[Slide 21]

Psalm 119:92: "Unless thy law had been my delights, I should then have perished in mine affliction.

93 I will never forget thy precepts: for with them thou hast quickened me."

The end was near, but salvation has come at last. What is especially interesting is *how* the deliverance came. Lamedh tells us that God used His Word to rescue this person out of his time of great affliction. It was the Word that saved him and rescued him from peril. If the Word had not been there then all would have been lost and he would have perished.

Because of this deliverance, the Christian has begun to see that there is more to God's Word than he originally thought:

[Still slide 21]

Psalm 119:96: "I have seen an end of all perfection: but thy commandment is exceeding broad."

The works of men can only go so far, but the further the Christian delves into the Word, the more treasure he finds.

Nun – Guidance

In Nun we are told that the Word is what guides the Christian:

[Slide 22]

Psalm 119:105: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”

He doesn't just delight in the Word or meditate upon the Word; the Word is what guides his life and directs his actions. It illuminates his entire life and causes him to see the world differently. Not only does it light his path, but the Word causes him to rejoice:

[Still slide 22]

Psalm 119:111: “Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage for ever: for they are the rejoicing of my heart.”

Despite all the difficulties that he has faced, he is determined to stand firm. He will continue to follow the Word to the end of his days:

[Still slide 22]

Psalm 119:112: “I have inclined mine heart to perform thy statutes always, even unto the end.”

The troubles of his life have troubled him, but they have not caused him to abandon God. He is going to stay the course.

Qoph – Sorrow

Even though the Christian has faithfully served God, that has not made him immune to trouble and sorrow. In fact, in Qoph he has become overwhelmed with grief:

[Slide 23]

Psalm 119:145: “I cried with my whole heart; hear me, O Lord: I will keep thy statutes.

146 I cried unto thee; save me, and I shall keep thy testimonies.

147 I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word.”

Some people try to claim that if you are living right then you won't have problems in your life. They say that God wants to give everyone wealth and happiness, and all you have to do is claim it and it will be yours. But what we see in the Bible is that even faithful Christians can still experience times of tremendous sorrow and grief. This is not something unexpected or strange, for even Christ was referred to as the man of sorrows – a man well-acquainted with grief.

But what does the Christian do when he is broken and sad? He hopes in the Word. He goes to the Word for comfort and support and he keeps the commandments of God. In good times and in bad,

the Word is never far away.

Tau – The End

In the section of Tau we come at last to the end of the psalm. At the end of our journey we find the Christian continuing to praise the Lord for all He has done:

[Slide 24]

Psalm 119:171: “My lips shall utter praise, when thou hast taught me thy statutes.”

But he does more than praise God. He also speaks about the Scriptures and seeks to teach it to others. He is spreading the news of what God has said and done:

[Slide 24]

Psalm 119:172: “My tongue shall speak of thy word: for all thy commandments are righteousness.”

Interestingly, at the end of the psalm the psalmist does not claim to have all the answers or be a perfect Christian. Instead he still has a very humble opinion of himself. He sees himself as a sinner who is in constant need of grace. He closes by asking God to be the good shepherd and take care of him:

[Slide 25]

Psalm 119:176: “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments.”

This is a man who loves the Lord and His Word – and he realizes that he needs the Lord. The Word has taught him that the Lord is his strength, and so he cries out to God – for he knows that God is indeed the good shepherd who watches over His sheep.