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THE PRIORITY OF GOD'S WORD

Psalm 119

By

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Psalms: Lesson 21

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I often receive appeals from relief organizations with pictures of starving children from some poverty-stricken area of the world. It's sad that people are starving when there is plenty of food in the world to feed them. But I wonder, if God could take a snapshot of your spiritual condition, would you look like those children--spiritually starved for the food for your soul that is in His Word? If so, it is especially sad, because in our country we all own Bibles. Usually what is lacking with a person who is spiritually malnourished is the motivation to feed himself or else some basic principles on how to do it. I hope to motivate you to feed yourself from God's Word and give a few basic principles to get you going.

Psalm 119 shows us that the Word of God should have top priority in our lives. It stands as the giant among the Psalms--it is the longest psalm and the longest chapter in the Bible--176 verses. Since the Book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible, it shows us the priority of praise and worship to God. Since Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the Bible, it shows us the priority of God's Word to God.

The psalm is an acrostic or alphabetic psalm, in which there are eight couplets beginning with each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus the first eight couplets begin with aleph (= A), the next eight with beth (= B), etc. Depending on how you count, only three to five of the couplets (84, 90?, 121, 122, and 132?) lack a direct reference to the written Word of God through some synonym such as law, testimonies, statutes, etc. Although there are some obvious themes running through the psalm, the overall structure seems to be determined mostly by the alphabetic arrangement. It is the A to Z of God's Word.

We could easily spend six months working through the psalm. Spurgeon has 398 pages on it in his *Treasury of David*. Charles Simeon has 19 sermons on random verses from it. I'm just going to skim a few themes under the overall theme that:

Because the Bible is God's authoritative, reliable, and powerful Word, we should make it top priority in our lives.

There are many qualities we could study about the Bible, but I'm just going to develop three themes from Psalm 119: God's Word is authoritative, reliable, and powerful.

1. The Bible is God's authoritative Word.

When God speaks, He does not mumble. The Bible is not a book of "helpful hints for happy living." It speaks with authority. The terms used as synonyms for the Bible in this psalm convey the concept of authority:

(1) Law (v. 1; the main synonym, used 25x in this psalm) has the nuance of "teaching"; it can refer to a single command, to the first five books of Moses, or to all of Scripture (John 15:25; 1 Cor. 14:21). The law reveals God's will for how His people are to live. Since it comes from God the law is not just for academic interest, but for obedience.

(2) Testimonies (v. 2; used 10x in the psalm), from a root meaning "to bear witness." It points to the dependability of the Bible as a witness of things of God. It also has the nuance of warning.

(3) Ways (v. 3; used 7x of God's ways in this psalm) refers to God's characteristic manner of acting, as contrasted with our ways (119:5, 26, 29, 59, 168).

(4) Precepts (v. 4; 21x in the psalm) comes from a word meaning to oversee or pay close attention to a matter. Thus it "points to the particular instructions of the Lord, as of one who cares about detail" (Derek Kidner, *Psalms* [IVP], 2:418).

(5) Statutes (v. 5; 22x in the psalm) comes from a word meaning "to engrave in stone" and thus they "speak of the binding force and permanence of Scripture" (Kidner).

(6) Commandments (v. 6, 22x in the psalm) points to "the straight authority of what is said" (Kidner). It has the idea of giving orders.

(7) Judgments or ordinances (NASB, vv. 7, 13, same Hebrew word; 23x in the psalm) has the idea of justice rooted in God's

character. These are “the decisions of the all-wise Judge about common human situations” (Kidner).

(8) Word (v. 9; 23x in the psalm) is the most general term of all, emphasizing the fact that God has spoken.

(9) Word (v. 11; 19x in the psalm) is similar to the previous term. It is derived from the verb “to say” and may sometimes have the nuance of promise (NASB margin, vv. 38, 41).

(10) Faithfulness (v. 90), righteousness (v. 40), and name (v. 132) are also sometimes cited as synonyms for the Scriptures in this psalm.

The sum effect of these terms is that the Scriptures speak with God’s authority. They are not *Reader’s Digest* type hints on how to live or suggestions for success. What the Bible says, God says. Obedience is not optional for us as believers.

2. The Bible is God’s reliable Word.

You can trust God’s Word. All of it is faithful, righteous, and true (vv. 86, 138, 140, 151, 160). It doesn’t change with the times (vv. 89, 152). One of the amazing things about the Bible is that it speaks with practical relevance to every culture in every period of history. When I read John Calvin’s expositions of Scripture, written almost 500 years ago to people in a very different world than our own, he still speaks with relevance to me! The answers to all the problems we face today are in the Bible, because it speaks God’s truth to our human condition, which has not changed over the centuries.

Satan is always trying to undermine the credibility of God’s Word. If he can’t do it by attacking the inerrancy of Scripture, he does it by subtly eroding belief in the sufficiency of Scripture. Pastor John MacArthur writes,

Contemporary evangelicalism has been beguiled and sabotaged by a ruinous lack of confidence in God’s Word. I’m not talking about the question of whether God gave us an inerrant Bible. Of course He did. And the great majority of evangelicals accept that without question. But many who would never doubt the Bible’s authenticity as God’s Word or distrust its essential authority as a guide for righteous living have neverthe-

less accepted the notion that Scripture simply does not contain all we need to minister well in these complex and sophisticated modern times. So they turn to human expertise in the fields of psychology, business, government, politics, entertainment, or whatever else they think might supply some recipe for success that's lacking in Scripture. (*Our Sufficiency in Christ* [Word], p. 117, emphasis his.)

We need to come back to what the psalmist here repeatedly affirms, that Scripture is reliable because it comes to us from God who understands our needs and who graciously has revealed how we should live. The Bible is God's authoritative and reliable Word. We must trust it!

3. The Bible is God's powerful Word.

Down through the centuries the Bible has had life-transforming effects in the lives of countless people from every conceivable walk of life. Here are five effects of the Word from Psalm 119:

A. The Word brings us into a living relationship with the living God.

We don't study the Bible to become Bible scholars. Nor do we study it simply to learn and follow its moral precepts, although we should do that. We study the Bible to seek God Himself (v. 2). The Word of God brings us into spiritual life (John 3:5; James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23) and sustains us in that life when our hearts grow cold. Since God is the author of life itself, His Word has life-giving power, both to bring the spiritually dead person to life and to renew the believer.

While the psalmist, in New Testament terminology, is already born again, he recognizes that the Word of God is the source of spiritual life and vitality. Note vv. 25, 37, 50, 88, 93, 107, 144, 149, 154, 156, 159. The Hebrew word means, "cause me to live." If the psalmist needed ongoing revival, how much more do we! The source of such revival is vital contact with God through His life-giving Word.

If you know Christ as your Savior, but are going through a difficult or dry time, seek God through His Word. God will use it to revive you. If you don't yet know Christ, read the Word (John is

a good place to start) and ask God to reveal Himself to you. He will and you will be born again to a living hope. There is life-giving power in the Word, because it brings a person into a living relationship with the living God.

B. The Word gives us stability in trials.

This is a major theme of the psalm. The psalmist (we don't know who he was; some suggest Ezra) was living in a hostile environment. People were speaking against him (vv. 22, 23, 51, 69). He repeatedly says he was being afflicted (vv. 50, 67, 71, 75, 107). Evil men were persecuting him (vv. 84-87, 109, 110, 161). The Bible is clear that godly people are not exempt from trials. Indeed, it's a promise you can count on: "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12)! But in all his trials, God's Word gave the psalmist stability and comfort (vv. 50, 52, 61-64, 75, 76, 92, 165).

After a trip to the United States, the late German theologian Helmut Thielicke was asked his observations about American Christianity. He replied, "They have an inadequate view of suffering." He was right! I'm convinced that one of the greatest needs for believers today is to learn how to deal with trials biblically. We have robbed God of His sovereignty by accepting the false notion that trials come from the devil. But that makes Satan sovereign, which is blasphemy!

I have heard many times, "God didn't cause this trial; He just allowed it," as if that gets God off the hook! People are afraid that if we say that God caused a trial, it robs Him of His goodness. But we need to join the psalmist in affirming both the sovereignty and goodness of our God when we go through trials (vv. 67, 68, 71, 75, 76). We may not understand God's purpose in our suffering. But we can know and must affirm by faith that He is both sovereign and good: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

C. The Word gives us direction in life.

We all have to make hundreds of decisions that determine the outcome of our lives. Some are minor, some are major; but they all clump together to shape our lives. In the complex world in which

we live, we desperately need God's wisdom for making sound decisions.

In the winter, it is often dark when I leave the office. The light switch in the Fireside room is on the wall opposite the outside door. So I have to shut off the light and try to navigate the room in the dark without running into the chairs and other objects in the way. I'm not always successful! The world is like that. It is dark and strewn with obstacles to trip us up. As we grope in the dark, if we make a wrong turn we can experience a great deal of pain. God's Word is our source of light. It shows us the path of God's wisdom so we don't have to whack our shins in the dark.

Note verses 18, 24, 98-101, 104, 105, 130. This kind of wisdom does not come by neglecting the Word until a crisis hits and then opening it up for some emergency guidance. You've heard of the man who needed to know God's will, and so he opened the Bible at random and pointed to a verse. It said, "Judas went and hanged himself." He thought "I'd better try again." So he pointed again and the verse said, "Go thou and do likewise." He thought, "This can't be what God wants--I'll try once more." So he pointed again at random and read, "What thou doest, do quickly!" God's wisdom and direction comes from a thorough knowledge of His Word, gleaned over the years as a person walks closely with Him.

D. The Word produces purity in our lives.

Each of us wrestles with the problem of inward purity. We might be able to put on a good show outwardly, but inwardly we are sinners by nature and we wage war against wrong thoughts, desires, and attitudes. God's Word is essential for becoming pure in heart (vv. 9, 11, 36, 37, 133).

John Bunyan said it well: "This Book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this Book." If you will meditate on God's Word and commit it to memory, God will use it to keep you from sin. Even if you don't retain it and think you're wasting your time in reading God's Word, you're not. D. L. Moody said, "The only way to keep a broken vessel full is by keeping the faucet turned on." Keeping the faucet of God's Word running repeatedly through your mind will clear out the garbage and make you pure.

E. The Word gives us joy and delight.

Some Christians are “castor oil” Christians: “the Bible is bitter, but good for what ails you.” “A chapter a day keeps the devil away.” Others are “shredded wheat” Christians: the Bible is dry, but nourishing. The psalmist was a “peaches and cream” believer: He delighted in God’s Word and couldn’t get enough of it (vv. 14, 16, 24, 77, 92, 111, 129, 162). He had joy in the midst of his afflictions (v. 92). We can know that same joy as we delight ourselves in God’s Word.

Wherever the Word of God has gone, no matter how pagan the culture, it has transformed lives. When David Livingstone was pioneering in Africa in the last century, he offered to teach one tribal chief to shoot and also to read. But the chief declined because he was afraid that if he learned to read the Bible, it might change his heart and make him content with only one wife, as it had done with another chief! He was perceptive: The Word of God is authoritative; it is reliable; and, it is powerful to change the hearts of sinners into saints. Thus,

4. The Bible deserves top priority in our lives.

To benefit from the Word, we must be diligent in three responsibilities:

A. We must learn God’s Word.

God doesn’t automatically zap us with knowledge of His Word. We must apply ourselves with diligence and discipline in order to learn the Word. In the process we must be taught of God, of course. But we must also spend time and effort learning (vv. 15, 16, 18, 27, 33, 34, 73, 78, 102, 108). With the busy lives we all lead, it takes discipline. We must make it a priority to learn the Word.

B. We must obey God’s Word.

Knowledge without obedience leads to spiritual pride and deception. Stuart Briscoe once asked an audience, “What do you do with the commandments in Scripture?” A little old lady raised her hand and said, “I underline them in blue.” God’s Word wasn’t given to fill our notebooks, but to correct our sin. This is a dominant theme in the psalm, but especially in verses 1-8.

C. We must love God’s Word.

Love is the motive for obedience. We are to love God's Word because it reveals the God of love to us. His loving commandments are for our good. Note vv. 47, 48, 97, 113, 119, 127, 140, 159, 163, 165, 167. If you've lost your love for God's Word, you need to repent and recover your first love (Rev. 2:5).

Practical suggestions:

Maybe you don't know much about the Bible and have never read or studied it. You tried once and died in Leviticus, overwhelmed with the King's English. How do you get started? Five brief suggestions:

1. *Buy a good modern translation.* The Bible was written in common language. In 1611 (when the King James Version was translated) they talked with thee's and thou's. Today we do not. For study, I use the New American Standard Bible (the Ryrie Study Bible edition is helpful). It has the flaw of King James language in sections addressing God (such as Ps. 119), but it is the most literal translation. The New International Version is a bit freer and easier to read for getting an overview. (Some critics call the NIV the Nearly Inspired Version!)

2. *Be systematic according to your needs.* I would recommend starting in the New Testament. Also, read Psalms and Proverbs in the Old Testament. After you've read through the New Testament a few times and are grounded, you can build on it with the Old Testament. Your needs will vary. Sometimes you'll want to read through the whole New Testament or a whole book very rapidly. At other times, you'll want to slow down and chew on a shorter section. But have some system so that you aren't haphazard in your approach. Let the Bible interpret itself as you compare Scripture with Scripture. A general rule: the epistles interpret the gospels; the New Testament interprets the Old. Check your interpretation against several reputable scholars.

3. *Be prayerful.* Ask God to teach you. Commune with Him as you read, study, and meditate.

4. *Be persistent.* If you miss a day or two, don't quit. Three days a week is better than none. Five is better than three. Keep at it!

5. *Be practical.* The Bible is meant to be obeyed. Apply it to your life (not to your mate or kids!). Ask God for wisdom in ap-

plying it. Be as specific as possible. For example, you may apply Psalm 119:11 by thinking, "I ought to memorize some Scripture." That's okay, but too general. "Tomorrow on my lunch break I will take 15 minutes to write Psalm 119:9, 11 on a 3 x 5 card and commit it to memory." That's specific and practical. This isn't always easy to do, but if you work at it, you'll see growth.

Business guru Tom Peters was asked at a seminar what he thought the most important criterion for career success might be. Tom turned, went to the board and wrote, in foot-and-a-half-high letters, "PASSION." You gotta love what you do. Ray Kroc, the late chief of McDonalds was serious when he used to say, "You've gotta be able to see the beauty in a hamburger bun." Debbi Fields, founder of Mrs. Fields Cookies, says, "I'm not a businesswoman, I'm a cookie person." (*A Passion for Excellence* [Random House], p. 288.)

My question is, Are you a person of the Word? Is it your passion? If not, you're spiritually malnourished. Ask God to revive you through His Word. If you can't find the time, I have one final suggestion: Turn off your TV set! Amen!

Discussion Questions

1. How do we reconcile the psalmist's love for God's law with Paul's teaching that we're not under the law? How do we reconcile obedience to the Word with grace?
2. Do you agree that the reliability of the Word is being eroded by our widespread turning to the world's wisdom?
3. How can a person who isn't a reader become a person of the Word? Must every Christian be a scholar?

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