



Jan/Feb 2020

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

PSALM 119

ALSO: SEEKING GOD IN SUFFERING

Friends:

Recently my sister showed me a video she shot while trying to drive on a flooded country road. In the pitch dark of night the roadway disappeared under a sheet of water. A flooded farm field had washed over the road into a field on the other side. Though the water on the road wasn't deep and the road itself was straight, it was risky to keep going in the dark. Without side markers, it was a lot like driving with your eyes closed. Thankfully, another car approached from the other direction, and their headlights shone down along the flooded road like a lighthouse. With the headlights as a guide, my sister could move forward and stay out of the ditches on either side.



This January, Kurt Selles studies Psalm 119 and its call to look to God's instruction as our lighthouse in the storm. God's Word is a light on our path and a lamp for our feet (Psalm 119:105). With its guidance, we can always find our way.

Then, in February, Bonny Mulder-Behnia leads us a bit deeper into the storms of life as we explore seeking God in suffering. Just what can we expect from God when life's turbulence tosses us about?

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping "S" and "K".

—Steven Koster

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“Psalm 119”
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“Seeking God in Suffering”
Bonny Mulder-Behnia

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ReFrame
Media

january

Psalm 119

Kurt Selles

When was the last time you read Psalm 119? If your answer is “A while ago,” or even “Never,” that wouldn’t be a surprise. Even a dedicated Bible reader can find that the sheer length of Psalm 119 is intimidating—not to mention its detailed structure and challenging themes.

Yet throughout history, God’s people have found Psalm 119 to be a truly inspiring and edifying word from God. Throughout its 176 verses, the psalm passionately calls God’s people to be deeply engaged with God’s Word, the Bible. The psalmist teaches us that we meet God himself in his Word. And as we come to know God more, our desire to love and serve him grows. So let’s focus on Psalm 119 this month, praying that it will spark in each of us a deeper passion for God’s Word and for loving and serving God each day.

Kurt Selles is the director of Back to God Ministries International, the parent organization of ReFrame Media, which publishes these Today devotions. Kurt is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary and Vanderbilt University. Kurt previously served as director of the Global Center at Beeson Divinity School, where he also taught missions. He also served as a missionary in Taiwan and China. Kurt and his wife, Vicki, have three adult children.

SWEETER THAN HONEY

They are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

—Psalm 19:10

C.S. Lewis, who wrote the *Chronicles of Narnia*, called Psalm 19 “one of the greatest poems in the world.”

After celebrating God’s creative glory in the sun, the moon, and the stars, Psalm 19 celebrates God’s even greater revelation in his *Torah*. In English, the Hebrew word *Torah* is often translated as “law.” At its root, it simply means, “God’s Word for those who want to live in a way pleasing to God.” God gives his *Torah* as a guide for his people.

Psalm 19 celebrates the *Torah*, God’s Word, as a reflection of God’s love, mercy, and holiness. Today, because of Jesus’ saving grace, we know that following God’s law is not about staying between the lines; it’s about loving, serving, and living for God, in his strength. People who follow God’s way are

blessed with refreshment, wisdom, joy, and enlightenment.

Psalm 19 also gives a brief and helpful summary of God’s *Torah* presented in Psalm 119, a much longer psalm that celebrates and elaborates on the value of living by God’s Word always. For a life of loving service to God, Psalm 119 shows us the Creator who delights in his world and his children.

At the close of Psalm 19, the writer falls to his knees in humility and reverence before God. And this month, as we look into the teaching of Psalm 119, may we all be inspired to do the same.

O Lord, your words are “sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.” Help us to live by them each day. Amen.

THE WISE THING TO DO

Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD.
—Psalm 119:1

When you get a new coffee pot, a power tool, or a car, it makes sense to follow the maker's instructions. They tell you what you need to know about using the new product.

Similarly, we need to follow *our* Maker's instructions. They are essential for living life to the fullest, as God intends for us.

As Psalm 119 begins, it points out that people who follow God's way are blessed and blameless. But we need to clarify two things.

First, in giving his Word, God tells us, "This is how I created you to live. When you live according to my instructions, you will be blessed." This does not mean everything will be easy, but, whatever the circumstances—easy or difficult—your life with God and others will flourish because you aim to honor and obey God.

Second, we must consider the meaning of *blameless*. *Blameless* does not mean "perfect." Everyone sins, falling short of God's righteousness and perfection (Romans 3:23). But all who are redeemed by Christ, the Savior, are declared righteous by God. When we believe in Christ as our Savior, we long to be like him, to live God's way, according to his *Torah*. And Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6). The hunger for righteousness leads to being filled.

What are you hungering for? If you want to please God, follow his Word with all your heart.

O Lord, guide me in your ways, and "I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws." Amen.

HIDE IT IN YOUR HEART

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.
—Psalm 119:11

For an extra challenge as we look at Psalm 119 this month, we might try memorizing this psalm. Many Christians have memorized Psalm 119, including the French philosopher Blaise Pascal, the British abolitionist Wilbur Wilberforce, and the British missionary David Livingstone.

What might be the purpose of memorizing passages from the Bible? In the section we are focusing on today, the psalmist urges us to read, to ponder, and to store up God's Word in our hearts *so that* we know God more deeply and strive to please him with our thoughts, words, and deeds.

The benefits are beyond measure. Meditating deeply on God's Word increases our joy. People who aim to live by God's Word have praise on their lips and joyful delight in their hearts. Through nurtur-

ing God's Word in our hearts, our passion to please God will grow. And our lives will grow more pleasing to God as we seek to live by every word that comes from his mouth.

Whether or not you take up the challenge to memorize Psalm 119, take the psalmist's advice to store up God's Word in your heart. As you do, your joy will grow as you learn God's will and strive to please him more and more.

Lord, help us to seek you with all our heart, and do not let us stray from your commands. Amen.

DELIVER ME AND INSTRUCT ME

Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees.
—Psalm 119:23

Most of us have times of lament. We complain, we groan, we mourn, and sometimes we weep. Lamentation comes with the sting of our fallen world. The Bible contains many laments. In this section of Psalm 119, we find the first of many laments in which the psalmist cries out for God's deliverance.

The psalmist calls himself God's "servant," and that's all we know about him. Some suggest that the writer is King David of Israel, who wrote several psalms of lament. Others have suggested Ezra or Nehemiah, who also had to deal with leadership struggles when they returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. Here the author cries out in anguish to God for deliverance, even while complaining that God treats him like a stranger.

Since we all experience moments, days, and even seasons of lament, we can learn from the psalmist's prayer. Even in desperation, the writer shows that he wants to know God's Word and live by it: "My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times." Adversity doesn't drive the psalmist away from God. It drives him *closer* as he waits for the One who reveals himself in his Word.

In our times of trouble, may our prayers for deliverance also drive *us* deeper into God's Word, to love and obey him as we wait for relief from him.

Lord, in all times and in every situation, may your Word be our delight and our counselor. Amen.

MEDITATING ON GOD'S WONDERFUL DEEDS

Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds. —Psalm 119:27

You've probably noticed that the psalmist uses several words to describe God's law. The writer of Psalm 119 uses "law," "ways," "decrees," "precepts," "statutes," "commands," and "word" to refer to the same thing. At first glance, the legal associations of these terms might make God's Word seem like a heavy set of do's and don'ts weighing on all our actions.

But that's not how the psalmist views God's Word. In this prayer for deeper understanding of God's precepts, the psalmist connects God's Word with God's "wonderful deeds." Specifically, the psalmist may be thinking of God's "mighty hand and . . . outstretched arm" in freeing Israel from slavery in Egypt and bringing them into the promised land (Deuteronomy 26:8-9). Generally, the psalmist is referring to *all* of God's mighty

deeds on behalf of his people throughout history.

It's obvious that in meditating on God's Word the psalmist isn't taking on a heavy yoke of shoulds and should nots. Rather, God's Word crowds his mind with memories of God's faithfulness to his people and to the psalmist personally.

That's what God's Word does for us too. It teaches us about God's deep love for us and his power to save us. Such knowledge allows God's Word to work in our hearts to increase our love for him and to nourish our desire to serve him in gratitude.

Lord, help us to choose the way of faithfulness, and set our hearts on your Word. Amen.

FULFILL YOUR PROMISE

Fulfill your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared.

—Psalm 119:38

Psalm 119 has the distinction of being an acrostic poem. It has 22 sections, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and every verse in each section begins with the same letter. In today's section, each verse begins with the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*he*)—and there's a bonus feature: all of the initial words in these verses are commands in Hebrew. So the psalmist is boldly making demands of God.

In short bursts, the psalmist demands that God “teach him,” “give him understanding,” “direct him in the path,” “turn his heart” toward God's commands, and so on. Though direct and strong, the psalmist makes these demands not in arrogance but out of a desire to honor and please God, trusting in God's promises.

The psalmist demands God's help because he knows his

own weakness and tendency to turn away from God. Orient me toward your statutes, he pleads, and not toward my own gain: “Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life.” This prayer reflects the writer's desire to live God's way and to follow God faithfully.

We do well to imitate the psalmist's prayer. May we, too, long for God and seek his help in turning from things that can distract us from him so that we can glorify and serve God in the world.

Give me understanding,
Lord, and help me follow
your Word and obey it
with all of my heart.
Amen.

GOD'S UNFAILING LOVE

May your unfailing love come to me, LORD, your salvation, according to your promise.
—Psalm 119:41

Some people have compared Psalm 119 to a string of pearls. Rather than develop one theme, the psalmist adds one pearl at a time so that together they create a beautiful strand of truth and wisdom. The pearl of this section is God's "unfailing love."

God's "unfailing love" (*hesed*) is the most important term in the entire Bible. Over and over, we read stories in the Bible that show God's steadfast, unfailing love for his children—through thick and thin, and often despite their own tendency to wander from God.

In this section, the psalmist highlights God's unfailing love and reminds us of the relationship between God's Word and us. God reveals himself and his unfailing love for us through his promise that he will never leave us or forsake us (see Joshua 1:5). As we read

of God's love and promises, a chain reaction sets off within us. God's Word fills us with awe and wonder for God himself, and we, in turn, grow in our desire to love, please, and serve God and others.

Do you want to grow in your faith? Dig deeply into God's Word. As you delve deeper, you will grow in knowledge and grace with a desire to love and serve God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love others as yourself.

You have steadfastly loved us, Lord. Help us to love and delight in your Word as we grow in loving you and others. Amen.

COMFORT IN SUFFERING

My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.
—Psalm 119:50

As we noted earlier, we don't know who wrote Psalm 119. Some people have suggested that maybe the prophet Daniel wrote it. If he did, the words in this section could echo his own life experience.

Filled with hatred, Daniel's rivals mocked and scorned him. Daniel was a highly effective leader, and King Darius of Babylon put him in charge of one-third of the kingdom. But Daniel's enemies hated him so much that they tricked the king into making a new law: whoever prayed to any god or person besides Darius the king would be thrown into the lions' den. They did this because they knew Daniel prayed only to God and would never pray to Darius. Soon Daniel was seen praying to God, and he was thrown into the lions' den at sundown the same day. All through that night, however,

God protected Daniel, and his life was spared. (See Daniel 6.)

These words of Psalm 119 provide an inspiring example. The psalmist's suffering drives him deeper into God's Word, and he meditates on it even as he waits sleeplessly through the night, finding comfort in God's promises.

No one likes to suffer, but we can take courage that suffering can actually move us closer to God. As we meditate on God's Word, we experience ever more deeply his love and the comfort of his promise to preserve us.

Help us to remember your promises, Lord, and to find comfort in them. Amen.

GOD, OUR PORTION

You are my portion, LORD; I have promised to obey your words.

—Psalm 119:57

With words such as “Though the wicked bind me with ropes,” the psalmist continues his lament in this section of Psalm 119. The laments of this psalm are often raw and deep. And yet we can sense that the psalmist finds safety in the promises and love of the Lord, the surest source of comfort and protection.

Notice that this section begins with the words “You are my portion, LORD. . . .” This is likely a reference to the way God gave portions of the promised land to the tribes of Israel (see Joshua 13-21). Allotments were given to all of the tribes except for the tribe of Levi, because God had dedicated the Levites to serve and lead in the worship of the Lord. Their service to God included everything from offering sacrifices to teaching the law, and from leading in worship to

taking care of all the materials used for worship (see Exodus 25-30). As Joshua explained to the people, “The Levites . . . do not get a portion among you, because the priestly service of the LORD is their inheritance” (Joshua 18:7).

In a similar way, the psalmist has nothing and no one but God to depend on. The Lord is his portion, his inheritance. In utter dependence and trust, the psalmist takes everything to God in prayer, including his laments. With God as our portion, we too have the privilege of taking all our troubles and cares to the One whose guidance and instruction give us full life.

Help me to seek you with all my heart, Lord, and reveal your promises to me. Amen.

GROWTH IN AFFLICTION

It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.
—Psalm 119:71

We long for tranquil lives. We often pray for health, prosperity, and success.

And yet it is often times of struggle and difficulty that bring us closer to God, along with a greater desire to please him. That's a lesson the psalmist brings out in this section.

Afflictions can easily result in bitterness, robbing us of joy. As we have already seen in Psalm 119, the psalmist has experienced trials at the hands of his enemies. Instead of tumbling into the black hole of bitterness, however, the writer gives thanks to God for two things.

First, he has developed a trusting dependence on God. Despite his trials, the psalmist confesses to God: "You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees."

Second, the experience of affliction has driven the psalm-

ist closer to God and more deeply into God's Word. I long to be obedient, he says. And his search for knowledge and good judgment leads him to affirm the priceless value of God's Word, saying it is more precious "than thousands of pieces of silver and gold."

How do we handle afflictions? We all experience them, and they are not easy. In difficult situations—whatever they may be—we can grow closer to God when we search his Word for the comfort and guidance we need.

Lord, you are good, and what you do is good. Teach us your words. Amen.

LIVING THE WORD

May those who fear you rejoice when they see me, for I have put my hope in your word.
—Psalm 119:74

All the verses in this section of Psalm 119 begin with *yodh*, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet; it's about the size of an apostrophe. When Jesus mentions "the smallest letter" in his discussion of God's law (Matthew 5:17-18), he is referring to *yodh*. But this small letter introduces big ideas.

As in many other Bible passages, the writer of these verses in Scripture praises God for creating him. But he is not thinking only of how he has been made physically; he is specifically praising God for molding and shaping his soul through the teaching of God's Word.

God wants to form his children spiritually, and that flows from his unfailing love and compassion. Because he loves us, God wants to see us grow in faith and love. Inspired by God's love, the psalmist leans deeper and deeper into God's Word.

The psalmist has mentioned his own spiritual growth repeatedly, but here he adds an important dimension. It's not enough to simply let God's Word shape *him*; the psalmist confesses that it is also his responsibility to reveal God's Word *to others*. He commits to doing this by being a living testimony to the beauty and goodness of God's Word and by sharing the importance of cherishing and following God's Word.

Unlike the letter *yodh*, striving with all our heart to follow God by testifying to the power of his Word is no small thing.

May we wholeheartedly follow your Word, Lord, and teach others to do the same. Amen.

HOPE IN GOD'S WORD

My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my hope in your word.
—Psalm 119:81

The psalmist cries out again for God to rescue him from his enemies. They have tried to trap him; they have tried to persecute him without cause. On the brink of despair, the psalmist is in crisis, “like a wineskin in the smoke.” Normally wineskins are soft and flexible, but long exposure to smoke makes them brittle. From abuse, the psalmist feels he is about to crack.

Pounding on heaven’s door, the psalmist cries out: Where are you, God? “When will you comfort me?” “How long must your servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors?” Rescue me from these troubles, now!

But it seems God is silent.

Did you notice the psalmist’s reaction to this? He doesn’t reject God or turn away from him. Instead, the psalmist’s trials

stoke his passion for God and for growing closer to God by meditating on his Word. In God’s Word the writer finds assurance of God’s unfailing love—and this, he says, makes him want to please God by living an obedient life.

Though our troubles may or may not be as difficult as the psalmist’s, we all experience waiting for God. And while we wait—resting on God’s promises—we have an opportunity to grow in following and serving the Lord.

In his time, God will answer. Will we seek him through his Word and continue to obey while we wait?

We wait for you, Lord—and as we wait, help us to grow in trust and obedience. Amen.

THE PERFECTION OF GOD'S LAW

To all perfection I see a limit, but your commands are boundless.

—Psalm 119:96

Almost everyone agrees that good laws promote good and restrain bad in human society. Because of the nature of our broken world, though, not all human laws are good. But God's laws (or "words of instruction") are good—and they are also good for us.

In this section of Psalm 119, the psalmist revels in the goodness of God's laws. They are eternal. They are the deep roots of creation. God's laws are just and consistent, valuable in every time and place and for all generations, in the past and present and into the future. God's laws are good because God is good, and his laws reveal his goodness. In short, God's laws are perfect.

The psalmist celebrates the perfection of God's laws, but he also takes them to heart. God's laws give comfort in times of anguish. They give

hope in times of despair. They even preserved the psalmist's life when he was surrounded by enemies. They provide a wisdom that leads to flourishing, which produces joy. No wonder the psalmist commits to meditating on and following God's laws, his precepts, his instructions, his commands, his statutes.

With the psalmist, we too should celebrate the boundless perfection of God's laws. And, like the psalmist, we should not stop there; we should let God's Word speak to our hearts and guide our lives.

Your Word "stands firm in the heavens," Lord, and "your faithfulness continues through all generations." Amen.

GOD'S WORD SWEETER THAN HONEY

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
—Psalm 119:103

Some people have described this section of Psalm 119 as “quiet.” Unlike many other sections, which bristle with emotional tension and cry out with pleas to God, here the psalmist quietly meditates on the wisdom of God’s Word.

As the Creator of the heavens and the earth and all living things, God knows what’s best for living in his world. If we want to learn and be guided by his wisdom, we need to turn to his Word. God’s Word guides and blesses all who seek his wisdom.

Not surprisingly, the enemies of the psalmist do not turn to God’s Word. God’s commands make him wiser than his enemies, he says. But what about the psalmist’s teachers and elders? Is the psalmist claiming to be wiser than they are?

Perhaps he’s criticizing these leaders for treating God’s Word as a textbook instead of a guide for daily living. We can only speculate. At the very least, we can understand this psalm as a lifelong call of living into God’s Word, which can nourish us with divine wisdom for everyday life. In this sense, we can see why the psalmist says God’s words are “sweeter than honey”!

Honey is both sweet and nourishing. Taste God’s Word: it’s sweeter and better for you than anything else. Then dig into it each day and find nourishment for your soul and truth to live by.

Help us, Lord, to grow in living by your Word and to avoid any path that would lead away from you. Amen.

GOD'S WORD, A LIGHT TO OUR PATH

Your word is a lamp for my feet, and light on my path.

—Psalm 119:105

Have you ever been in a truly dark place, where even a single move could be tragic for you or your loved ones?

We live in a spiritually dark world where our souls are often in peril. In this section of Psalm 119 the psalmist declares that God's Word is a light for our path for living in this dark world.

The psalmist vows to use God's Word to shine a light on his path. He's not suggesting that God's Word shines a light on the future, as if he could sneak a peek into events that would take place tomorrow or next year. He is saying that God's Word helps him to understand right from wrong as he faces choices *today*. He is saying God's Word teaches the meaning of obedience so that he can live confidently for God in his world each day.

Like the psalmist, we too need God's Word to guide our steps. Only God's Word can correctly inform us about the meaning of right and wrong. And the truth is, the more deeply steeped we are in God's Word, the more clearly we can discern right from wrong and choose the right path.

In some places you walk today, you may need a flashlight. But in every place you go, you will need God's Word as a lamp for your feet and a light for your path.

Accept the praise of our hearts, Lord, and guide us by your Word. Amen.

GOD'S WORD SUSTAINS US

Sustain me, my God, according to your promise, and I will live.

—Psalm 119:116

In these verses the psalmist combines two literary forms: lament and wisdom. He does this to highlight his sure confidence that God answers prayers and sustains his people.

The psalmist has cried out in lament many times already in Psalm 119. Like other lamenters in the Bible, the writer groans under the weight of distress in facing enemies and opposition. Here the psalmist reveals that he is under extreme duress from his enemies, who are also *God's* enemies.

In addition, the psalmist contrasts the wicked and the righteous. As biblical wisdom often points out, the unfaithful waver and stray from God's commands, and their delusions come to nothing. Because of their folly, God lets them go. The faithful, on the other hand, take refuge in God and in his Word, treating God's Word as

their shield and sword. They bow before God and put their hope in God's instruction, holding it in the highest esteem.

And in the midst of this discussion we hear the psalmist making a bold and wonderful request, in faith: "Sustain me, my God, according to your promise, and I will live."

Do you cry out to God for all your needs as they arise? Trust in God completely and live confidently in his promise to deliver you.

Lord, help us to live according to your Word, and sustain us according to your promise, we pray. Amen.

DISCERNMENT TO UNDERSTAND GOD'S WORD

Give me discernment that I may understand your statutes.

—Psalm 119:125

In this section of Psalm 119 we find some of the most memorable words in the entire psalm, as the writer declares that he loves God's Word "more than gold, more than pure gold." But if we lift this beautiful confession out of its context, we miss a more subtle truth in these verses: the psalmist's plea to *understand* God's Word.

In declaring how he treasures God's Word, the psalmist isn't merely offering a beautiful sentiment. He offers this like evidence in a court of law, as if he is testifying like a plaintiff. Because he loves God's words above all else and seeks to follow them, God should rescue him from his oppressors.

Knowing that we tend to see only our own point of view and that we often fall short, most of us would hesitate to put God on trial in a way like this. Nevertheless, we can learn

from the psalmist's request. He acknowledges his need for help in understanding God's precious Word.

Though we may not all dare to call God to account in pleading for his help, we all need guidance in discerning the truth of God's Word. We hear God's voice most clearly when we ask him to remove our distractions and reveal himself and his will to us.

And when God *does* speak to us through his Word—as he certainly will—we must apply God's teaching to our daily lives.

Teach us your Word, Lord,
and help us to love your
commands more than
pure gold or anything
else. Amen.

BLESSING FROM GOD'S WORD

Make your face shine on your servant and teach me your decrees.
—Psalm 119:135

The words “Make your face shine on your servant” echo the blessing found in Numbers 6:24-26. There God explains how to give his people a blessing, saying: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.” Here God conveys to his people that he sees them and promises to love and protect them.

In our reading for today, the psalmist sees the light of God's Word, and his passion for God grows, leading to a greater thirst for God's Word. As he reads and meditates, ponders and absorbs, the writer's understanding of God's love, mercy, and compassion deepens and his longing for God increases. The intensity of his passion for God leads him even to *pant* for God's Word!

Another important thing to note here is that the psalmist calls himself God's servant. Connecting God's blessing with service, the psalmist reminds us that blessings don't stop when they land on our doorstep. God blesses us—his servants—so that we can serve and be a blessing to the people around us.

Go ahead and ask God for his blessing, because God wants to bless you. He also wants you to be keenly attentive to his Word and to actively serve in his world.

Direct our footsteps,
Lord, according to your
Word, and let no sin rule
over us. Amen.

GOD'S WORD IS RIGHT

The statutes you have laid down are righteous; they are fully trustworthy.
—Psalm 119:138

In the Hebrew text of Psalm 119, the first word of this section is *saddiyq*—"righteous"—and the psalmist uses this word three more times in this passage. In each case, the writer praises God for his righteousness.

God is holy—perfect in goodness and righteousness. And since God is righteous, he wants his people to act that way too. God's main desire in this is that he wants his people to treat others as *he* would treat them. For example, God would never cheat anyone, so his people must never cheat either (see Leviticus 19:36).

The psalmist also affirms the wisdom of God's righteous commands for living in the world. They have been thoroughly tested and vetted for everyday living. Moreover, following God is not merely correct; his teachings create

healthy relationships for right living. God blesses all who strive to live according to his righteous words. So the psalmist praises God and asks for understanding.

When we live in the light of God's Word, it illuminates the dark places of our hearts. It shows us the serious flaws in our thinking and our actions, in which we tend to act with selfishness and self-righteousness. It prompts us to ask how we can instead reflect God's own righteous presence in the world. Then God's righteousness will become our passion too.

Your words have been thoroughly tested, Lord; help us to cherish them and live by them. Amen.

GOD IS NEAR

You are near, LORD, and all of your commands are true.

—Psalm 119:151

The psalmist's cries of desperation are becoming more and more urgent. In this section of Psalm 119, the writer cries out at least four times, calling for God's deliverance in the day and in the night. The psalmist's cries for deliverance have become continuous, relentless. He won't give up.

It seems the psalmist has reached a level of desperation. Yet each time he cries out, in his heart he expresses an equally strong affirmation of hope and comfort in God's Word. And he expresses his unflagging commitment to obeying God's decrees and statutes. Even as the psalmist's enemies inch closer, even as God seems to remain silent, the psalmist puts his hope in God and his Word, and he commits himself to obey God. In obedience, the psalmist finds God's heart and feels God's closeness.

A life of faith includes moments when God seems silent. We don't know why God doesn't always answer immediately when we call. But if we reflect on all the promises God has made and kept—all lavishly recorded in his Word—we can be sure that God keeps his promises and will answer. Turning to God's Word was a continual source of comfort and joy for the psalmist, especially in what seemed to be times of silence from God. And it can be the same for us.

We have put our hope in your Word, Lord; answer us when we call. Amen.

GOD'S PROMISE

Defend my cause and redeem me; preserve my life according to your promise.
—Psalm 119:154

Again the psalmist laments. Are you tiring of these laments? Maybe a guess at the psalmist's circumstances could help our understanding.

As we noted earlier, some people have suggested that King David of Israel wrote Psalm 119. David was a musician, and he did write a number of psalms. In fact, many of the songs and prayers in the book of Psalms are attributed to David, such as Psalms 3-9, 11-32, 34-41, 51-65, and many others.

David's psalms also include many laments. Several times in his life, David was on the run, pursued by enemies who wanted to kill him. A number of psalms even include a headline note about such episodes in David's life (see Psalms 52-59 and 1 Samuel 19-24).

So in some sections of Psalm 119, the writer may remind

us of David and the struggles he faced. Though the writer may not have been David, this psalm could have been written "in the tradition of" David, at least in some of its parts. And that could have provided Israel a helpful teaching tool, encouraging later generations to remember God's care for one of their greatest kings: David.

The plea "preserve my life, according to your promise" can apply generally to all believers, but it can also remind people that one day God gave David a unique promise. God promised to establish David's throne forever (2 Samuel 7)—and today we know that Jesus, our Redeemer born into the line of David, has accomplished that.

"Your compassion, LORD, is great"; preserve our lives according to your Word. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

CONTINUOUS PRAISE

Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws.

—Psalm 119:164

Does the psalmist really stop and praise God for his righteous laws seven times a day? In the Bible, the number seven suggests completion and perfection. Actually, the psalmist reveals that praise is *always* on his lips. So whether he prays seven times a day or continually, the psalmist offers a powerful example for us. Praise for God should always be on the tip of our tongue.

The psalmist has faced numerous difficulties, as we have noted throughout this month. Yet in each case, even as he languishes under the torment of bullies, praise remains on his lips. No, this isn't the power of positive thinking. It shows that believers who turn to God—even in the most desperate situations—find peace. God promises that he will never forsake his people.

While the psalmist waits on God, he immerses himself deeply in God's Word. In the process, his love for God's Word and for God himself deepens and grows. And as God's Word blossoms in his heart, praise flows from his lips at least seven times a day.

Whatever our circumstances, we too should be growing in our knowledge of and obedience to God's Word. As we do, our love for God will grow, and praise will be on our lips always!

Accept, Lord, the praises of our mouths, and teach us how to live for you. Amen.

GOD SEEKS US

I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.
—Psalm 119:176

It should come as no surprise that in this last section of Psalm 119—which starts with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet—the psalmist offers up one last lament. What *may* surprise us, though, is the psalmist's confession of his own guilt.

Although the writer has hinted about failing to keep God's Word, he has not openly admitted it until now. What's more, with his fiery condemnation of people who have violated God's Word, it would be easy to dismiss the psalmist as self-righteous. But here, at the very end of his psalm, the author compares himself to a wandering sheep. By his own admission, he stands guilty of failing to keep God's instructions. He needs help.

Throughout the psalm, we have seen the psalmist passionately crying out in desperate situations. Often he asks for God's

rescue, and repeatedly he finds peace and joy in meeting God in his Word, even when God may seem silent. The irony, of course, is that the psalmist hasn't been searching for God so much as God has been seeking the psalmist all along—from the very start. By providing his precious Word, which we all desperately need, God has shown beyond the shadow of a doubt his mercy and his love. God seeks us first and continues to provide for us.

God has sought us. Are we seeking to please him through obeying his Word?

May our lips overflow with praise, Lord, for you teach us your Word. Amen.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.

—Psalm 119:89

The writers of the New Testament quote the Psalms more than a hundred times. In his teaching and sermons, Jesus himself quotes at least sixteen psalms. But Psalm 119 is never quoted in the New Testament.

Does that mean this weighty (and lengthy!) psalm is only for Old Testament readers? Of course not. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). What’s more, another compelling reason for treasuring this psalm is that we see the eternal Word of God, Jesus himself, in it.

Though he’s not explicitly mentioned in Psalm 119, Jesus—the eternal Word of God—provides the key for understanding this psalm. The psalmist hints at this truth by saying, “Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.”

Though the psalmist sees “only a reflection as in a mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:12), John 1 reveals clearly that Jesus is the living Word of God. In the beginning with God the Father and the Spirit, he created all things; he came to live as one of us, full of grace and truth; and now he reigns over all things forever. All of the psalmist’s love of and longing for God’s Word are ultimately a longing for Jesus.

If you have time, read Psalm 119 again—with a love of and longing for Jesus.

Your unfailing love has come to us, O God, through your salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ. May we praise his name forever! Amen.

OPEN OUR EYES, LORD

Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

—Psalm 119:18

After rising from the dead, Jesus met several times with his followers. On the road to Emmaus, while he walked along with two of them, they didn't know who he was while he taught all about himself from the Scriptures. Only later, when he broke bread with them, were their eyes opened to see him as the Messiah, God's Anointed One, the Savior (Luke 24:13-35).

Then later that same day, in Jerusalem, Jesus met with a large group of his disciples. And after he opened their eyes to see that he had risen in the flesh, Jesus explained that all of the Scriptures—"the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms"—were fulfilled in him.

For us to see and understand Jesus in the Scriptures, we too need our eyes opened. Although the psalmist couldn't see Jesus or know what we

know about Jesus today, the psalmist certainly understood the need for eyes to be opened to understand God's Word.

Without our eyes opened, God's Word can seem like a legalistic code to measure how others—and we—fail to live righteously. With our eyes opened, we see in God's Word the living God who graciously reveals himself to us. We learn how to live the way God intends for us. We ultimately find the "wonderful things" of God's grace and mercy—above all, in God's gift of Jesus—and we live in gratitude for all he has done for us.

Open our eyes, Lord, so that we may see Jesus and live according to your Word. Amen.

HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Blessed are those who keep [the Lord's] statutes and seek him with all their heart. . . .
—Psalm 119:2

The Bible provides clear examples for right living. Abraham—in his better moments—provides a profound example of trust (Genesis 12:1-7). Joseph provides a powerful example of faith and faithfulness in adversity (Genesis 39-47). The author of Psalm 119 provides a vivid demonstration of passion for God's Word.

The psalmist has treasured God's words in his heart, and he seeks the Lord with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength to apply God's commands to his life. He does this despite the many challenges he faces, including the fierce opposition of his enemies. But as the psalmist himself also declares, he is not perfect; he must continue to dedicate his life to seeking God in his Word and striving to live according to God's righteousness.

Jesus—God's Word in the flesh—uses language similar to the psalmist to commend people who want to follow God's way: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Although we don't know who wrote Psalm 119 or how his life turned out, Jesus' words of blessing assure us that the psalmist's striving to please God was not in vain. As Jesus promises, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness "will be filled."

Are we, like the psalmist, hungering and thirsting for God's righteousness? If we are, God will satisfy us.

You bless us, Lord, when we seek your righteousness; help us to seek you with all of our hearts. Amen.

LIVING GOD'S WAY TODAY

My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end.

—Psalm 119:112

Very few drivers come to a complete stop at the stop sign near our house. Maybe they think the sign is only a suggestion.

Are God's laws merely suggestions? The psalmist treats God's law with the utmost seriousness. He declares, "My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end."

Jesus taught his listeners how serious God's law is. He explained that he did not come to abolish the law or any of God's commands; he came to *fulfill* them. And he said that not even the smallest letter (a reference to *yodh*, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet) or the least stroke of a pen would be eliminated from the law. Moreover, Jesus says there will be great rewards for keeping God's laws and great penalties for not keeping them.

The problem, though, is that none of us can keep God's law perfectly because—at heart—we are all in rebellion against God and his Word. What can we do?

We need the grace that only Jesus can provide through his death and resurrection. Once God has forgiven and redeemed us, we see his laws and words differently. The Spirit of God helps us to see them not as a source of condemnation but as a call to love both God and our neighbors. And by the Spirit's power we understand they are not a mere suggestion, and we follow them as a guide for thankful, obedient living.

Are we following God's way in the strength of the Spirit today?

Give us understanding,
Lord, so that in gratitude
we may live for you.
Amen.

TAKE MY YOKE

My eyes fail looking for your promise; I say, "When will you comfort me?"
—Psalm 119:82

It's impossible to overlook all the lament in Psalm 119. The psalmist repeatedly groans under the burden of his persecutors. They surround him, press in on him, mock him, and smear his reputation with their lies. At the brink of despair, the psalmist cries out to God, "My eyes fail looking for your promise; I say, 'When will you comfort me?'"

We don't know the identity of the psalmist, but we can be certain that God kept his promises and comforted him eventually. How can we be certain of this?

We can be certain that God answered the psalmist's prayer because of the assurance Jesus gives in Matthew's gospel: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Jesus' promise is for all of God's children, in both the Old

Testament era and the New Testament age. Indeed, Jesus' coming to our world to rescue sinners from eternal death—the consequence of our rebellion against God—is indisputable evidence that God hears our desperate cries for comfort.

Though he might not answer our appeals as we expect or as soon as we want, God *will* answer our cries in his perfect timing. Jesus is flesh-and-blood proof of that.

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

Our comfort in times of trouble is this, Lord: your promise preserves our life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

ANSWERING TEMPTATION WITH SCRIPTURE

With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.

—Psalm 119:13

We all face temptations. And we have to admit that sometimes we resist them and other times we don't. Maybe it's something that nearly everyone does, like gossiping or being judgmental of others. Or maybe it's a secret sin that no one else knows about.

Whatever our temptations may be, we don't face them alone. Jesus was tempted too. After his baptism, Jesus withdrew to the wilderness for a spiritual retreat and an extended fast. Sensing Jesus' weariness and weakness, the devil came and tempted him three times. In each temptation, the devil enticed Jesus to turn away from God's Word to fulfill a desire for personal gain.

Despite his physical need and exhaustion, Jesus fought off each temptation and resisted the devil. He did so in a way that the author of Psalm 119

would have understood: Jesus resisted temptation by using the truths of Scripture. In all three instances, Jesus quoted passages from God's Word.

When we face temptation, we have the comfort of knowing that Jesus has experienced temptation firsthand and is with us as we struggle to make the right choice. With this assurance in mind, we can actively resist temptation by answering it with the truth of God's Word, like Jesus did.

Store up God's Word in your heart. Then, when temptation comes, resist it with the truth of God's Word, knowing that God will give you strength.

Lord, you are our refuge and our shield. Help us to put our hope in your Word and in you. Amen.

THE PURIFYING POWER OF GOD'S WORD

How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word.
—Psalm 119:9

Years ago, when parents told their children to wash their dirty faces, they might have said, "Cleanliness is next to godliness." That saying is not in the Bible, but it may have come from some ancient Jewish teachers. The Bible equates godliness not with scrubbed skin but with pure hearts.

The author of Psalm 119 asks, "How can a young person stay on the path of purity?" And his answer is the core teaching of this psalm: "By living according to [God's] Word." But, honestly, how can we do that?

As most people will admit, having a pure heart is a difficult challenge. In fact, the Bible says this is out of reach for us. Our hearts are deceitful, self-absorbed, and disobedient. We need help. In his mercy, God sent his Son, Jesus, so that he could forgive us our sins and create pure hearts in us. In

John 17, Jesus prays that his followers will be "sanctified" (purified) through himself and through the truth of God's Word. And the Holy Spirit of God will provide us understanding and power to endure in this purifying process.

So, as both Jesus and the psalmist affirm, purity of the heart is strengthened and encouraged by the truth found in God's Word. The purifying process begins with knowing Jesus, and it continues daily as we grow in knowledge and grace.

Continue this process today as you reflect on God's Word.

Help us to long for your Word, Lord. Preserve our lives in your righteousness. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

TRUST AND OBEY

I will always obey your law, for ever and ever.

—Psalm 119:44

Have you ever heard the term “earworm”? It describes how the words or the tune of a catchy song can keep running through our minds. One song that is still lodged in my head after all these years is “Trust and Obey.” At the end of this reflection on Psalm 119, this song is playing in my mind.

The writer of Psalm 119 often mentions trust. God’s Word is trustworthy, he says; so he trusts in God’s laws, precepts, commands, and decrees. Along with that, the psalmist eagerly commits to obeying God’s Word. He explicitly speaks of obedience again and again and again. Clearly, the call to “trust and obey” God’s Word is at the heart of this psalm.

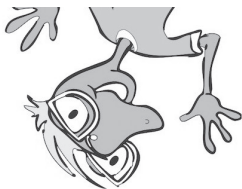
There’s another theme worth mentioning as well. The psalmist is committed to trust and obey *even in times of difficulty*. When the psalmist cries for

God’s rescue, he affirms his desire to trust and obey, no matter what.

This helps us see another way in which Psalm 119 points us to Jesus: on the night before he died for our sins, Jesus faced one of the worst moments of anguish recorded in the Bible, an experience more challenging than any we will ever know. And yet Jesus said to the Father about the suffering that was before him, “Not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus trusted and obeyed. What a blessing it is to know that “while we do his good will, he abides with us still, and with all who will trust and obey”!

Help us, Lord, to live for you, in the assurance that you love us and will never leave or forsake us. Amen.



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