

Aleph
Psalm 119:1-8
ABC 4/8/18

I encourage you to open your Bibles to Ps 119 as we begin our 22 weeks in it. The psalms were the divinely inspired hymnbook for Israel's worship of God (1 Chron 16:8-36). Because psalms weren't simply read, but sung, they penetrated the minds & hearts of the people as music often does. When Jesus entered Jerusalem it was only natural the crowd would greet Him by reciting a line from a psalm: **Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord...** (Mk 11:9; Ps 118:26). The psalms were also Jesus' songbook. The hymn He sang with His disciples at the Passover before His death would have been Ps 113-118 (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26). Psalms is also the book of the Bible Jesus quotes the most from. The early Christians sang & prayed the psalms as well (Col 3:16; 1 Cor 14:26). Throughout the 1st 1,000 plus years of the church the psalms served as the most familiar part of the Bible for most Christians.¹ The psalms have been a mainstay for Christians since the very beginning, although in recent times we don't seem to be going to them as regularly nor know them as Christians once did. Hopefully, prayerfully, our time in Psalm 119 will reignite an appetite for the psalms among us all. The psalms aren't just to be read; we're to be immersed in them so that they shape how we relate to God. As Timothy Keller says, *The psalms are the divinely ordained way to learn devotion to our God.*² They were written to be read, prayed, recited, sung, meditated on, & lived out. The psalms, & especially Ps 119, help us see God, not as we wish or hope Him to be, but as He actually reveals Himself to be. Ps 119 is focused on the theme of the Word of God. We will see this time & time again, but the psalmist isn't just repeating himself. As we go through we'll see he's incredibly varied in his application of God's Word to our everyday lives. Although we don't use the word *piety* much anymore or we have a knee-jerk, negative reaction when we hear it because we associate it with people who think they're holier than everyone else, it's a good word. It simply mean the quality of being religious or reverent.³ In other words, it's *the life of God in the soul of man.*⁴ Piety is the way of

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Psalms of Jesus*, p vii

² Ibid

³ Oxford Dictionary online

life for the believer immersed in Scripture expressed in all the experiences of life. Stand as we read **Ps 119:1-8** PRAY

If someone told you they could teach you the secret of true happiness, would you be interested? This psalm does that & more. In vss 1-8 I want you to see several things. The 1st is very simple but easy to miss.

1. God's Word is God's Word We need to remember that. Whenever we pick up our Bibles we need to remember whose Word it is. It's God's Word, not man's. All too often we place our opinions on the level of God's truth & fail to realize the uniqueness of having God's Word given to us to read, to hear, to understand, & to respond to. The psalmist presses home this truth that God's Word is the Word of God time & time again. Look at how the writer does this. In vs 1, he speaks of **the law**. As we've seen, he uses several names for the Word of God throughout this psalm. In general, the author speaks of the Word of God as **the law**. But what does he call it? He doesn't just call it **the law**, he calls it the **law of the Lord**. The law isn't just the law, it's the Lord's law. God's Word is God's Word. Look at vs 2. Here he speaks of **testimonies** but he doesn't just say **testimonies**, he says, **His testimonies**, God's testimonies. The emphasis is these **testimonies** come from God. Vs 3, he speaks of **ways**. **Way** is a term referring to a path or manner of living. But he doesn't just say, **ways**, he says, **His ways**. Vs 4, he speaks of **precepts**, but he doesn't just say **precepts**, he says, **Your precepts**, God's precepts. Vs 5, he speaks of **statutes**, but he doesn't just say, **statues**, he says, **Your statues**. Vs 6, he speaks of **Your commandments**. Vs 7, it's **Your righteous judgments**. & in vs 8 he speaks again of **Your statutes**. Do you see the emphasis? The psalmist wants us to understand that God's Word is God's Word. These aren't man's ideas about God. These are the very words of God to us. In them He reveals Himself to us. They are God's revelation written down for us. They are inspired & authored by God. God's Word is God's Word. That's important to remember as we live the Christian life, especially in our day & age where the authority of God's Word is constantly under attack. If you see the Word of God mentioned in our culture today, it's often denigrated, questioned, & undermined as being divisive, bloody,

⁴ Title of Henry Scougal's book written in 1677. For an overview see www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/a-summary-of-henry-scougals-the-life-of-god-in-the-soul-of-man/

irrelevant, & worthless. But the psalmist wants us to realize from the very beginning that God's Word is God's Word. If you're wavering in that conviction, please come talk to me or one of your elders. We want you to be resting with confidence in the truth that this is the Word of God. We've staked our lives on it, now & for all eternity, & the beginning of the true way of life is in confidence in God's Word being God's Word.

2. The Way of Blessing The 2nd thing we see in vss 1 & 2 is that the psalmist teaches us the way of blessing & happiness. Don't we all want that? Here God tells us how to be **blessed**. The way of true blessing & happiness is the way of God's Word. Listen to what he says: **How blessed are ... who? Happy, truly blessed, are who? Those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Vs 2, How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their heart.** Holiness is happiness. If you aren't holy, you aren't happy. & if you want to be happy, try holiness. God tells us the way of blessedness not just here in Psalm 119 but also in Ps 1. In many ways Ps 119 is a commentary on Ps 1. How does Ps 1 begin? **How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD & in His law he meditates day & night (1-2).** That's what we want, right? How do we get there? **1**

Blameless comes from a root word that means to walk straight. We grow up spiritually by putting one foot in front of the other & walking on the path that God has laid out. If we fix our attention on His Word, we will walk straight & learn how to deal with sin & how to keep it from being a master over us. If we keep walking in God's Word, if we stay on God's path, then we will be **blessed**. We'll experience the spiritual wealth that is our birthright: The joy, peace, & satisfaction in life that only God can give. True blessedness is walking according to the Word of God. The reason we aren't happy is that we sin & the main reason we sin as much as we do is because we don't know the Bible & the God of the Bible as well as we should. The fact is that apart from being instructed by God, we don't know how to find happiness. We know that. Besides that, our experience confirms it. If you're a believer, you know the times of deepest blessing you've ever experienced are when your life, your desires, & your thoughts have been shaped by God's Word.

I don't say those times have been your most trouble-free times. It's often in the times of greatest trouble that you experience the greatest blessing. Why? Because what you cared about wasn't simply being freed from your troubles but you longed for God's presence in your time of trouble. Your goals were drawn from Scripture, your motivation was derived from Scripture, & your desires were directed by Scripture. & even though you were in those storms of life, you depended on God completely to get you through. Both in Scripture & in experience, you know this is true. True blessedness, true happiness, is when you're walking in & according to God's Word. But more often than we like, we don't experience this, do we? Every time we sin, we are, in some form or fashion, questioning the truth of God & His Word. If you take something that's not yours, why do you do that? You steal because you think it will increase your joy, that you'll be happier because of it. But God's Word says that won't make you happy. You think cheating will somehow increase your joy, so you cheat. But God says that won't make you happy. So when you do it, what are you saying? You're saying, *I've got a better way to happiness than God does.* Every time we sin we are in some way calling into question the truth that the way of blessing & happiness is in the way of God's Word. That's something we have to wrestle with & the psalmist is very aware of this. He isn't just throwing out platitudes; this isn't chicken soup for the soul. The psalmist doesn't say to take 2 Scriptures & call him in the morning. The psalmist knows the fight of faith we all face. He's going to use very strong words about that fight of faith in vs 8. But he also knows that for the believer, both the Bible teaches & experience confirms, true happiness is only found when you're walking according to the Word of God. Listen to what William Plumer says: *No man has taken the 1st step towards real, abiding blessedness unless he has become a sincere & habitual servant of the Most High God according to Scripture.*⁵ What's he saying? He's saying we don't know the 1st thing about happiness until we've taken that 1st step towards living for God according to His Word because that's where blessedness is found. No matter what Satan says, no matter what the temptations of your own heart says, the way of blessedness is found only in the way of the Lord. Think of it like this: A driver who ignores traffic signs & signals is an

⁵ *Psalms: A Critical & Expository Commentary*

accident waiting to happen. Anyone running a red is a danger to himself & to others. God's Word has some red lights as well that should control our lives as Christians. When the Holy Spirit alerts us to our ignoring them we should immediately hit the brakes & pull over in confession. We should be more fearful of ignoring God's commands than we are of running a red light & getting in a wreck or receiving a ticket. Our love for God is expressed in our doing His will by living according to His Word. How can we receive God's blessing? By being **blameless** before the Lord, obedient to His **testimonies**, & wholehearted in our relationship to Him. We get that. But some of the words that follow (law, precepts, statutes, decrees, commands) have a way of frightening & almost paralyzing us with despair. When we think of law, we usually think of cursing & not blessing (Dt 27:1–28:68; Josh 8:30–35). But we have to remember that Jesus bore the curse of the law for us on the cross (Gal 3:10–13). The law isn't a weapon in the hands of an angry judge but a tool in the hands of a loving Father, used by the Spirit to make us more like the Savior who died & rose again for us. God's Word enables us to know Him better & draw closer to Him. Only Jesus was totally blameless in His relationship to God & His law, but because believers are **in Christ**, we are **holy & blameless before Him** (Eph 1:4). His love is in our hearts (Rom 5:5) & His Spirit enables us (Gal 5:16–26), so His law isn't a heavy yoke that crushes us, because **His commandments are not burdensome** (1 Jn 5:3). God wants us to know Him. But to know Him we have to seek Him. & the only place we can do that is in His Word. The psalmist also tells us we must ...

3. Walk It, Not Just Talk It The way of the Lord is about our walk & not just about our talk. A literal but awkward translation of the 1st part of vs 1 is this: *O how blessed are the ones having integrity of manner of life.*⁶ It's those who characteristically obey God's Word who are the ones who experience the blessing of happiness, contentment, & satisfaction. Listen to the language that's used in **vss 1- 3**.

Do you see that? **Way, walk, observe** or **keep, seek, do, walk**. All of these words indicate a way of living, not just saying the right words, but living it out in real life. It's not enough to understand

⁶ George J Zemek, *The Word of God in the Child of God*, p 69

or ponder God's precepts. We must practice them in our daily lives. Seeking God means much more than just reading or studying the Bible. It means hearing Him speak in His Word, loving Him more, & wanting to delight His heart & please Him. It means wholehearted surrender to Him (2, 10, 34, 58, 69, 145). All of the psalms make it clear that this kind of life isn't without its dangers & disappointments because we often fail. The writer of this psalm often found himself crying out for revival (25, 37, 40, 50, 88, 93, 107, 149, 154, 156, 159). Once he had done that, he confessed his sins, got up, & started walking with God once again. The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings. As we cultivate an appetite for the Word (10, 20, 40, 81, 131) & feed upon it, we give the Spirit something to work with in our hearts & He enables us to walk in God's paths. If we feel ashamed when we read God's Word (6, 80), then we have to stop & find out why & confess it to the Lord. Better to be ashamed now & confess it than to be ashamed when we meet the Lord (1 Jn 2:28). Seeking Him provides the context for keeping His Word (Ps 24:6). & again, idolizing the Bible is ruled out because the Word of God is the vehicle by which we are to wholeheartedly pursue Him. The purpose of knowing the Word of God is to know the God of the Word. That's why some of the godliest people you've ever met simply live out the Word in their lives. They love their God they've come to know in His Word & they quietly live it out. They're not just talk. They actually walk the walk. Matthew Henry says, *It will not serve us to make religion the subject of our discourse, but we must make it the rule of our walk; we must walk in His ways, not in the way of the world, or of our own hearts (Job 23:10, 11; 31:7).*⁷ & isn't that the point the psalmist is making? The way of blessedness isn't about talk, it's about walk. It's about living out God's truth. We know, & the psalmist tells us ...

4. It's God's Will That We Grow in Holiness Listen again to what God says. **4-5**

The psalmist gets personal here. This isn't a theological position paper on God's revelation. It's an interaction with the Living Lord regarding His chosen way of revealing Himself to us. It's the personal journal of one who had been taught in the things of God & practiced them in his walk of faith. The Word of God is commanded so that we might keep it. The psalmist's aim & goal is to

⁷ Henry, M. (1994). Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete & unabridged in one volume (p. 914). Peabody: Hendrickson.

live out the Word of God & grow in holiness. Don't miss that he's primarily concerned with the Giver of the law rather than merely the law itself. Because the Lord has ordained or commanded His Word, it's invested with His authority. & because His Word is an infallible standard for us concerning obedience, walking & living according to it is a must. Having sensed the burden of God deeply (4), he's consumed with documenting that desire personally (5-8). Did you notice the change in pronouns? He moves from **they** to **we** to **I & my**. This becomes very personal for the psalmist & for each one of us. As Christians, we each wish we wouldn't sin. But like the psalmist, we know better. This is a confession from the psalmist. He's saying he hasn't always lived in God's blessing. His ways haven't always been blameless. He hasn't always sought God with all his heart. But he wants to change that.

Lord, I don't want to sin against You. I don't want to rob You of Your glory. I don't want to sin because Your lovingkindness is better than life. In Your court is joy forevermore. In Your presence is true blessedness. I don't want to live outside of Your blessing, but that's where sin takes me. I don't want to live outside Your joy, but that's where sin takes me. I don't want to rob You of Your glory, but that's what my sin does.

We get tired of sinning, don't we? We don't want to do it anymore. Why? Because we know God's ways are the only way we can grow in happiness & holiness. You cannot grow in holiness without growing in happiness & you cannot grow in happiness without growing in holiness. They are inseparably joined. But even when we aim at the perfect standard of holiness, even in the best of times, we fall so far below it. This sense of helplessness should lead us to the throne of grace to pray & watch & wait for the strengthening & refreshing influences of God's Spirit of grace.⁸ Look at **vs 6**.

Christian holiness is comprehensive. True piety, truly living for God & walking with God isn't indifferent to any of God's commands. Every time we come to the Word, it will do one of 2 things to us: It will commend us for our obedience to it or it will condemn us for our failure to obey. We can't help but be reminded of the response of the doer of works, in contrast with the forgetful hearer, of James 1:22-25. As Christians, we want to never be ashamed as we expose our lives to the penetrating, piercing word of God. Shame was the ultimate disaster in the ancient Near East.

⁸ Charles Bridges, *Exposition of Psalm 119*

Even today, dishonor is a dreadful thing in certain cultures. But here the meaning is a very private feeling of shame. The psalmist dreaded the worst kind of disgrace, an internal & painful exposure of not following the commands of God in the very presence of an omniscient God. When God graciously provides the resources for the psalmist's walk to conform with His Word (5), then he won't feel the pangs of disgrace as he looks into the mirror of God revelation of Himself. Have you had the experience where you're listening to God in His Word but there's some area of your life where you're NOT willing to submit to God's Word & you know it? Maybe you're constantly fighting against jealousy & you don't even want to try to fight it anymore. Or maybe you're battling against bitterness & you just don't think it's worth it anymore so you just go with it & become more grumpy, critical, & bitter. Or maybe it's anger, greed, lust, gossip, lying, or whatever. John Owen said, *Be killing sin or it will be killing you.*⁹ True godliness isn't indifferent to any of God's commandments & we know if we allow sin to be nurtured in one area of our life, Satan will use that against us & we won't experience the blessedness of God's promises.

5. True Piety is Based on God's Word Look at vs 7. True piety, living the Christian life, is based on the Word of God. **Vs 7**

He's saying, *Lord, I'll live the way You want me to live when I know Your Book, when I've studied Your Word, when I've understood Your Revelation.* The foundation for Christian living is the Word of God. Living for God is based on biblical knowledge & theology & doctrine. That's why the psalmist says the lamp of God's truth is the light of our path (105). The path, the feet, reflect living, walking along the way, but what lights it? What guides you? The Word of God. True Christian godliness is based on the Word of God. That's why Matthew Henry said,

*As long as we live we must be scholars in Christ's school, & sit at His feet; but we should aim to be head-scholars, & to get into the highest form. God's judgments are all righteous, & therefore it is desirable not only to learn them, but to be learned in them, mighty in the Scriptures.*¹⁰

Learn in vs 7 is a word that signifies discipleship. Learning involved not just knowledge, but learning how to live. Teaching wasn't just the transferring of information from the teacher to the

⁹ *Mortification of Sin*

¹⁰ Henry, M. (1994). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete & unabridged in one volume* (p. 914). Peabody: Hendrickson.

student, but also the instilling of wisdom or applied knowledge. Why must we be people of the Word? Why must we be learners of God's truth? Why must we be disciples of Jesus Christ? Because the life of blessedness is based on the Word of God! We long to walk with God along His paths & to know His blessing. The only way we can do that is if our lives are based on the Word of God. If we're not in the Word of God & the Word of God isn't in us, chances are our living isn't blameless. John Calvin says, *No one will worship God sincerely & cordially, unless He has made such progress in Christ's school as to mold his life into subjection to His Word.*¹¹ In other words, you won't worship & thank & praise God for the right reason & from your heart, unless you're living according to His revealed Word, unless you're subjecting all of your life to all that Jesus has commanded. This reminds me of the Great Commission, when Jesus told the disciples to go to all nations & to **teach them to obey all that I have commanded you** (Mt 28:18-20). We will never truly worship God unless we've subjected ourselves to the Word of God because true Christian devotion is based on the Word of God. & finally ...

6. To Walk With the Lord Requires Discipline & Dependence on God's Grace Listen to the resolve in the 1st part of vs 8 & to the desperation in the 2nd part. **8**

I shall keep your statutes. That's the resolve & discipline that's needed to live according to God's Word. The resolve to keep God's **statutes** is the result of having learned His **righteous judgments**. But while firm in his purpose, the author is distrustful of his own strength, knowing the keeping of the law is beyond his power. Therefore, the next moment he follows it up with a prayer, **Do not utterly forsake me.** Wait a minute? What's this all about? Doesn't Heb 13:5 & Mt 28:20 say God is with us always? Aren't we secure in God's hand & nothing can pluck us out of it (Jn 10:29)? How can the psalmist say, **do not utterly forsake me**? He's saying, *Lord, I want to do Your Word! But I know I don't do Your Word! Lord, I know I'm going to fall flat on my face! Help! Don't leave me!* He knows & loves God's Word, yet he's very conscious of his inability, apart from the work of God in his life, to live God's Word. The heart that sings, **do not utterly forsake me**, is a heart that longs to be close to God. Deeply sensing his vulnerability, he pleads with the Lord not to leave him

¹¹ Quoted by Ligon Duncan, <http://ligonduncan.com/psalm-119-not-by-bread-alone-blessed-are-those-who-walk-in-the-word-709/>

completely or permanently. Without unbroken communion with his God he knew there was no hope for him to live obediently. Those who are most godly in their desire for holiness are least confident in their ability to follow God's commands through their own resolve, so they cry out to God in desperation for help. That's why I said the psalmist isn't giving us clichés; he knows the struggle we all have. *Lord, I want to live for You. I want to walk according to Your Word. But I know the minute I make that resolve I'm going to fail; I'm going to step out of this room & I'm going to stumble. Don't forsake me.* Paul wrote similarly in Rom 7:15-23. Although we want to obey God in all things, we don't & can't, at least in our own power. The desire & resolve to obey is blended with a consciousness of our inability to do so, unless aided by God's divine grace.

Listen again to William Plumer:

These eight vss teach that true piety is sincere, consistent, practical, hearty, intelligent, earnest, active, stirring, diligent, humble, distrustful of itself, symmetrical, guileless, unspotted from the world, self-renouncing, confident in God, delighting in thankfulness, fully purposed to keep the law, & ready to confess without God's grace that it cannot do any of it.¹²

Do you see how God's Word & the gospel & God's grace all go together in the living of the Christian life? The One who commands our obedience, perfectly knows our weakness. & the one who feels his own weakness is fully encouraged to depend on the power of His Savior. If you could read a book that taught you about true happiness, that helped you resolve the tensions of your desires & your stumblings in the Christian life, would you read it? That book is Ps 119. I trust you'll continue with me in this journey through it in the weeks ahead. Let's pray. COMMUNION

¹² *Studies in the Psalms*, p 1025

This table & the elements upon it remind us that we are incapable of saving ourselves by our own goodness. All the psalmist says about keeping God's commands & walking in His path has nothing to do with saving us. It's because we have been saved by God's grace through Jesus Christ alone that we want to please Him with the way we live. It's only the goodness, the obedience, the worthiness, & the merits of Jesus that saves us. Nothing we do will ever save us. We simply come to Christ with faith, trusting Him alone for our salvation. Our obedience then follows this. It was for our sins that Jesus came to this earth as a man while remaining fully God. He lived a sinless life. He died in our place upon the cross, experiencing the wrath of God against our sins. But the story doesn't end there, does it. Death could not hold Him & He rose from the dead never to die again. He offers to us His resurrection life. We exchange our sins (which He paid for) for His righteousness (which He has by never committing a sin). We remember & celebrate all of this this morning.

PRAY PASS

Paul tells us, **I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; & when He had given thanks, He broke it, & said, *This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.***

We remember Jesus & His righteousness which He has given to us as we eat of the bread together.

In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, *This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.*

We remember Jesus & His bearing God's wrath against our sins & His death in our place as we drink of the cup together.