



Mem

YOUR LAW, MY FIRST LOVE!

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

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Psalm 119:97-104
Sixth Message
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The father of one of our elders died suddenly last week during open heart surgery. He was 63 years old and had just retired and moved into a beautiful home overlooking the ocean in the northern part of the state. Harry Rosing was a wonderful, gentle man whose Jewish roots went back to Russia and Romania. Later in life he came to faith in Christ and became a completed Jew. At the memorial service, I wondered what I could do to help assuage the pain which the family and friends were obviously feeling, so I gave people an opportunity to share a word of appreciation about this man. Both of his sons gave a moving testimony of the glory of their father; how he had always been with them in the small things of life, and so forth. The treasured memories that were shared evoked a powerful sense of love that overcame everyone in the room. This man was the delight of everyone's affections, family and community alike. As I listened to the tributes, I reflected that appreciation does much for the human soul. I sensed clearly what are the best gifts in life, and for this family, the best gift to them was their father, this gentle man.

In Psalm 119, the psalmist likewise takes time to reflect on the things that his soul appreciates. In these studies I have likened the Christian's spiritual journey through life to an ascent up a mountain to the heavenly Zion. At times, the terrain is undemanding, and the pilgrim stops to take in the beautiful vista on all sides. At other times, the trail becomes so steep he reaches his end; he must tunnel straight up and ascend for a while in total darkness. Today, we come to a place on the mountain where the psalmist stops and looks back on the trail he has traveled. Here, in the cleft of the rock as it were, under the wings of God's protection, all is still. He has an opportunity to reflect on his journey, and the deepest emotion he feels is a profound sense of appreciation to God for his Word. God had been with him on his journey, every step of the way, through thick and thin, mediating his life to the psalmist through the gift of his own Word. This is what gives him wisdom, life and protection. In our text today then, verses 97 through 104, introduced by the Hebrew letter *Mem*, the psalmist makes no petitions. These verses are pure meditation as he expresses appreciation for where he finds himself by the grace of God. He gives thanks for the ultimate gift that has mediated the life of God to his soul: the Word of God itself.

He begins with a statement about his affections for this Word and how it has benefited his mind.

I. Unrivaled insight: His mind (119:99-100)

How I love Your Law!
All the day it is my meditation.
Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies,
For they are ever mine.

**I have more insight than all my teachers,
For Your testimonies are my meditation.
I understand more than the elders,
For I have observed Your precepts.**

(a) More understanding than his elders: *Discernment without the pain of experience*

The psalmist loves the law for what it does to his mind; like nothing else in life, God's law enhances his mind. It makes him wiser than his enemies, grants him more insight than his teachers, and more understanding than his elders.

I want to take these three things in reverse order because there is a spiritual progression to them. The elders were those men who sat in the city gate, deciding on political and economic matters. Despite all their experience, however, the psalmist has even more understanding. "I understand" means "[I] pay careful attention in order to understand, to discern between." In music, the untrained ear that lacks discernment hears only the melody line when the orchestra plays, but the trained ear hears the harmony, the individual instruments, whether they are playing on key, on tempo, etc. "Understanding" means knowing right from wrong; what to do, when and how to do it. We have an example of the usage of this word from the days of Solomon, on the occasion when two women claimed to be the mother of the same baby. One of the women said, "...when I rose in the morning to nurse my son, behold he was dead; but when I *looked* at him *carefully* [this word 'understanding' in our text] in the morning, behold, he was not my son, whom I had borne." (1 Kings 3:21.) That is deep discernment. The discernment which the believer acquires through the Scriptures is as powerful as the insight a mother has with regard to her own child; she does not need scientific help to discern whether or not the child is hers. This is the kind of discernment that the Bible imparts concerning matters of morality. The psalmist didn't have to go through the pain of experience to acquire understanding. He knew certain things to be true because his discernment came through the revelation of Scripture.

He had more understanding than his elders, but he had a second thing.

(b) More insight than his teachers: *Confidence unhampered by tradition*

He is writing during the time period that is referred to as the four hundred silent years. But these actually were four hundred years of prolific writing by the rabbis. They produced commentaries on the Scriptures, and then commentaries on the commentaries, implying that the truth could not be found other than by wading through the insights of these great human thinkers. This is why Jesus once said, "You treat the traditions of men equal to the word of God." But he had insight and discernment into the

nature of things without having to consult the traditions of men. He received it through revelation! Now this word insight means to have so deep an understanding into the nature of things that when you are faced with great difficulties, you are imparted skill and shrewdness to think your way through them, to act prudently, with the result that you will be successful. Abigail, “a woman of good understanding” (1 Sam. 25:3), is a good illustration of this kind of wisdom. She was married to a fool, Nabal. David had been protecting her husband’s flocks, and when he sent his men to ask for food and supplies in payment, rather than being thankful for their services, Nabal insulted and humiliated them. When David heard of this he became enraged, and he vowed to wipe out Nabal and his men. Abigail was caught between her wicked fool of a husband, and David, who was acting unrighteously. What did she do? With great insight and wisdom she said to David, “On me alone, my lord, be the blame.” She confessed she wasn’t aware that the men whom David had sent had need of food. She admitted the wrongdoing of her husband, and gave David the gift he had originally sought. By her wise response she disarmed David’s emotional outburst. And then she raised the stakes. She indicated that God had used her to restrain David from shedding innocent blood. The Lord is the one who takes vengeance, she pointed out. David should have been off fighting the Lord’s battles, not involving himself in these little disputes. His desire for vengeance had distracted him from a higher calling. Finally, she said to David, “the lives of your enemies He will sling out as from the hollow of a sling”—reminding him of his victory over Goliath. Abigail had used her insight to solve an extremely complex situation.

As I watched the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings over the weekend, the debate over who was telling the truth and who was lying went back and forth. I listened as politicians made speeches to advance their own causes instead of getting to the heart of the serious issue before them. Deuteronomy warns that we not receive or even entertain testimony by one witness. If we followed this insight we would be saved from the debacle we are now going through. Today we are holding court in our own living rooms, and reputations are being attacked and destroyed in the process. While I have no personal judgment into the matters under investigation, I feel that if we applied Biblical procedures we would save ourselves the spectacle of politicians sidestepping issues and serving their own agendas rather than getting the truth. More important, we would save people’s reputations because we would only receive the testimony of two eyewitnesses.

The psalmist has a third attribute.

(c) Wiser than his enemies: *Security without status or position*

The psalmist’s enemies (the princes he refers to in verse 23) may have come from the political community. They slandered him at a cost to him financially. Lacking any other resources, he was forced to flee to God and to his Word, and there he found refuge. The Word equipped him with discernment, followed by insight, concluding in wisdom—the moral skill for living life. Though the storm of slander beat against his boat he did not veer off course. He could go to sleep each night without apprehension, knowing God was his trust. This is what wisdom brings—security without status or position. David is a good illus-

tration for us here. Saul, the king, had everything he needed to destroy David—political clout, the priesthood, the military, the budget, etc. David, an outcast, was forced to sleep in caves in the wilderness. All he had was the prophetic word that he was God’s chosen king. Yet Saul did not succeed in destroying David. Once, when Saul sought to relieve himself and unknowingly entered into one of the caves where David and his men were hiding, David’s men saw this as a great opportunity to kill Saul. But David wouldn’t have it. He would not raise his hand against the Lord’s anointed. The prophetic word told him that he was king, and that word alone, not apparently fortuitous circumstances, would make him king. He refused to fight fire with fire; he did not compromise his integrity.

There is nothing like the Word of God to enhance our understanding. Do we, like the psalmist, love that Word like nothing else? It made him more understanding than his elders, gave him more insight than his teachers, and made him wiser than his enemies.

God’s Word granted the psalmist yet another thing.

II. Unparalleled versatility (119:98-100)

Notice the arenas where he can function because of the insight he receives from God’s Word. The enemies he speaks of represent the political world, the princes who used their position of power to try and destroy his godly reputation. But God’s Word made him wiser; he could function in their realm because he had security without position or status. And he had more insight than his religious teachers. We could apply this to the world of higher learning today. Like the psalmist, we need not be intimidated by degrees or credentials because the Word gives us even more insight. And he had more understanding than his elders, the men who gathered at the city gate to discuss the economic and legal issues of the day, pronouncing legal judgments and settling disputes. He could function in their realm.

In every realm therefore the psalmist’s understanding was deeper, his insights as to a plan of action superior, and his integrity, purer. Believers should never feel intimidated to function in any realm of life. If you know the Scriptures you can function anywhere, in any realm.

So there we have the value of God’s Word to the mind of the psalmist, and its versatility.

Next, he goes on to refer to another benefit.

III. Unequaled protection: His feet (119:101-104)

**From every evil way I have restrained my feet,
In order that I may keep Your word.
From your judgments I have not turned aside,
For You Yourself have taught me.
How sweet are Your words to my taste!
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
From Your precepts I get understanding;
Therefore I hate every false way.**

Having set out what the Word of God does for his mind, the psalmist now details what it does with his feet, which is a metaphor for the path he has decided to take in life. To begin with, it enlightens his choices.

(a) Consistently right choices

**From every evil way I have restrained my feet,
From your judgments I have not turned aside.**

First, negatively, he has a consistent aversion to the wrong path; and second, positively, he has a steady walk in the right path. Now there are two sides to this. It is never enough to merely abstain from what is wrong; there is an imperative to do what is right. Abstaining from adultery is proper behavior, but husbands need to cultivate romance with their wives, too. Not only are we to not steal, we must give to the needy. We are not to merely endure our enemy, we are to love him.

This man made consistently right choices. How did they come about?

(b) Prompted by internal changes

**How sweet are Your words to my taste!
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
From Your precepts I get understanding;
Therefore I hate every false way.**

Righteous behavior cannot be imposed from without; change must first be internal, in the heart. The psalmist acts righteously because a change has occurred in his nature. He took the word internally and it tasted sweet to him. Morality cannot be imposed on cultures or on individuals; it must come from within. Children will not make right moral choices unless they have a strong spiritual life. Righteous moral choices spring from a love relationship with God and for his Word. This is what changes the very nature of the believer. Jonathan Edwards, in his classic book *Religious Affections*, put it this way:

God gives life, not just something additional. Christ lives in the soul. So grace in the soul is as much from Christ as the light in a prism is from the sun. The glass remains as it was; its nature does not change, and yet the light is received. This only partially represents the communication of grace to the soul. But the true Christian receives light from the Son of Righteousness in such a way that his nature is changed, and becomes like the light received. God's people become like little suns. To change the metaphor, they not only drink of the water of life flowing from the original fountain, but this water becomes a fountain within them, springing and flowing out of them.

The psalmist learned to make right choices because the Word of God had changed his nature. Now what motivated this change?

(c) Motivated by love

**From every evil way I have restrained my feet,
In order that I may keep Your word.
From your judgments I have not turned aside,
For You Yourself have taught me.**

If you are here today because you are motivated by duty, I can tell you from my own experience that that will not carry you very far. Nor will feelings of duty help your children. Neither will fear of hell or fear of consequences carry you far. Love is what will do it. Love is the ultimate motivation for life. It was love that motivated the psalmist. He had an aversion to sin because God himself had personally taught him these commandments. This is why he regards sin not as an ethical mistake, but as a breach of

trust. Some today say it doesn't matter what anyone does so long as it doesn't hurt people ethically. Adam did not hurt Eve ethically. He did not sexually harass her. Eve did not hurt Adam ethically either. Their sin was a breach of trust. They made an illicit reach for something that God had warned them against and said would kill them. They focused on what they could not have as being life itself, and in their independence grasped it. They committed a breach of trust. When God begins to personally instruct you from his Word, then, when temptation comes, you will be able to look past the fleeting pleasure of sin and see the eyes of the loving Father, and your love relationship with him will help you not to succumb. This is what changed the psalmist too—the love relationship he had with the God who taught him personally. Peter denied Jesus three times, and then he looked straight into the eyes of his Lord. He broke down and wept bitterly because he knew at that moment that he had broken his trust. And this is the true nature of sin—it is a breach of trust. But the Scripture builds bonds of love from within. This is not accomplished by applying an external code from without, a code that is void of love, unable to effect change, and unable to motivate.

The psalmist appreciates God's law for what it has done to his mind, and because it protects him on his path.

How did he respond to this?

IV. Wholehearted devotion (119:97-100, 103)

**O how I love Your Law!
It is my meditation all the day,
Thy commandments make me wiser than my enemies,
For they are ever mine.
I have more insight than all my teachers,
For Your testimonies are my meditation.
I understand more than the aged,
Because I have observed Your precepts...
How sweet are Your words to my taste!
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!**

Because he appreciates the law and has affection for it, the psalmist describes his devotion to it in three activities. First, he memorized it.

(a) Love possesses: *Memorization*

"For they are ever with me." Wherever he goes, he takes the word with him. When I was courting Emily, we communicated by letter for more than four years. She wrote to me every day, and I kept all those letters and even numbered them because wherever I went I wanted her words to go with me. I think the psalmist is saying that he memorized God's Word. He put it in his heart so that he could take it with him. We should read this Word whenever we can and memorize it as we are able. Even hearing it read cleanses the soul. Because I am not good at memorization, I seek the literary structure in the text as I find this helps me memorize what it is saying. I recommend this.

Second, says the psalmist, he meditated on the word.

(b) Love considers: *Meditation*

**All the day it is my meditation.
How sweet are Your words to my taste!
Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!**

The basic idea of the verbal root of "meditation" is to re-

hearse or go over a matter continually in one's mind. This was often done audibly, thus it can also be a synonym for prayer. Memorization of the Scriptures therefore is a helpful prerequisite to true Biblical meditation. Oswald Chambers writes, "Meditation is an intense spiritual activity. It means bringing every bit of the mind into harness and concentrate its powers; it includes both deliberation and reflection. Deliberation means being able to weigh well what we think, conscious all the time that we are deliberating and meditating." Here is what Charles Haddon Spurgeon said about meditation, "To believe a thing is to see the cool crystal water sparkling in the cup. But to meditate on it is to drink of it. Reading gathers the clusters; contemplation squeezes forth their generous juice." Once when I was a student I meditated for an entire day on John 14. I was on a boat going from Italy to Greece, and as I sat on the deck meditating, other students and professors kept coming by and I had opportunity to share the gospel. But life is much busier today now that I am the father of three daughters. How do I meditate when I spend so much time ferrying my children all over the place, especially on weekends? Well, now I have made my car my sanctuary. As I drive, I play tapes of Bible readings, hymns and theological teachings, and I have fellowship with Christ as I travel from one place to another.

And third, the psalmist observed the word.

(c) Love acts: *Observing*

For I have observed Your precepts.

"Observed" means much more than obedience, It means to guard, protect, keep. He is referring to a careful protection of the truth in his heart, knowing it would come under attack. And he knew that the word would also come under attack in the public sphere, thus he was willing to contend publicly for the truth so that God's name would be honored. Henry Martin was Charles Simeon's assistant pastor at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge. He was a gifted mathematician who gave up an academic career to be an evangelist. When he heard the name of Christ blasphemed, he said, "I could not endure existence if Jesus were not glorified. It would be hell to me if He were to be thus always dishonored." Any insult to Christ was an insult to himself, and so he would contend for the truth.

So there we have the psalmist's wholehearted devotion to the Word of God, manifested in these three things: memorization, meditation, and observation. I would say our weakest area today is meditation. We have Bible translations and commentaries by the dozens, and we make valiant efforts at obedience, but we don't take time to contemplate, thus our obedience is shallow. We must recover a love for God's Word, and that will result in deeper meditation. You cannot say you love God if you are not devoted to his word. Carry it with you, place it within your heart, meditate on it, and guard it! Then we can say, with the psalmist, "How I love Your Law, All the day it is my meditation."

Now all of this raises a question:

V. How can God's law be life for me?

(a) The experience of the apostle Paul

The apostle Paul took an entirely different view of the law than the psalmist. Our psalmist says he loves the law because it brought him life, but Paul says it did not bring him life, but death: "I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity though the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me" (Rom 7:9-11).

(b) Which way is your mirror turned?

How can we reconcile the psalmist's view of the law with Paul's? Is the law meant for death or life? Let me illustrate. A few years ago, our family took a vacation in Oregon. Following a rainstorm one day, the puddles of water everywhere reflected the beautiful sky, the sparkling blue broken here and there by rain clouds. I asked my daughter to look into a puddle and tell me what she saw. Looking straight down into the puddle, she replied, "Mud! All I see is mud!" Then I asked her to step back and look again. "Oh, now I see the pretty heavens, the sky and the clouds," she said. Puddles of water gave two different reflections, depending on one's perspective. Now let us imagine that that puddle is the law, and the law is meant to do both things, depending on your perspective. On the one hand if you look straight into it, it is like a mirror which reveals all of our inadequacies. It reveals, provokes and condemns sin; it kills us. But if you gaze with a converted heart and you reflect it up into the heavens, what do you see? Not mere commands addressed to your weak flesh, but a description of the heavenly Man, Christ, who can fulfil the law. If you adopt that perspective with regard to this text, then you will see a Christ who loved the law. It was his meditation all the day; it made him wiser than his enemies. Did Judas succeed? Did the Romans succeed? Did Israel succeed? No. Jesus was wiser than his enemies. And he had more understanding than the elders of Israel. He rebuked them for making the traditions of men superior to the revelation of God. He had more insight than the teachers of Israel. He rebuked Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, saying to him, "You must be born again." He knew how to act in the midst of the complexities of life and be successful. And he restrained his foot from every evil path. He clung to God because he loved God. As you contemplate the law in this way, you will see the heavenly Christ on the page. So reflect on God's best gift to you, his Word, and appreciate it! Christ made this Word incarnate. If you have received him, he resides in you. Christ, that gentle Man who gives us everything we need, is God's best gift to us. The law is meant first, to lead us to Christ, and second, to impart Christ's life to us once we have been converted. If he does indeed dwell in you, then you can say wholeheartedly, with the psalmist,

*O how I love Thy law,
It is my meditation all the day!*

Amen.

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