

Delight in the Law of the Lord  
Psalm 119

Our text today is Psalm 119, the giant psalm. When we read Psalm 119, we praise God for giving us the Torah, the Law of Moses. How often have you praised God for the law of Moses? Probably not very often. The way I was taught, we were more likely to praise God that we were free from the law of Moses. But Psalm 119 praises God for the law, the Torah, and today we also will praise God for the Torah. Blessed is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord. That's from Psalm 1. The composer of Psalm 119 delighted in the law of the Lord like no one else.

But first turn to Deuteronomy 6. We'll begin by looking at a paragraph from Deuteronomy 6.

1 The Law in Israel's Faith – Deuteronomy 6:20–25

This paragraph from Deuteronomy 6 explains how the law fit into Israelite life and theology. These six verses summarize Israel's faith.

*In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent signs and wonders—great and terrible—on Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land he promised on oath to our ancestors. The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness."*

So your children ask, "what is the meaning of all these decrees and laws that the Lord has commanded?" The answer to that question is a story. Get that. When your children ask about the law, says Moses, tell them this story, to show them why we have the law. We don't understand the law until we put it in a story.

First, we were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt. We were slaves in a hard place. Then, the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes, God judged Egypt and Pharaoh and his household. It was a great and terrible judgment, and God did this in front of us.

God brought us out of Egypt so that he could bring us into Canaan, the land he solemnly promised to our ancestors long ago. And he commanded us to keep his laws and decrees so that it would go well with us in the land. That is how we got the law, and that is why we got it.

God does not meet us with rules and commands. He meets us by redeeming us from slavery, by rescuing us from the authority of darkness. That's how Israel first met God, and that's how we meet him. He has already made a way for us by not sparing his own Son.

And once that relationship has been established, then he says, “since you are now my people, this is how you are going to live.”

That’s how Israel got the law. The law comes at the end of a rescue story, to protect them, so that it would go well with them in the land.

## 2 Psalm 119: Hymn of Praise, Prayer for Help

This psalm holds up the law, the Torah. *Torah* means instruction as much as it means law, so the English word “law” is a little misleading. The first five books of the Old Testament are called the Torah, God’s instructions.

This psalm revolves around two centers. One, it is a hymn in praise of the Torah. The Torah is more precious than gold, it is sweeter than honey, it is a lamp to his feet and a light to his path. Twelve times he says to God, “I love your law.” “I love your commands, I love your decrees,” and so on, nine more times.

The other is centre prayer for help. Again and again we say, “preserve my life.” “May my cry come before you.” “Look on my suffering and deliver me.” “I call out to you; save me.” “How long must your servant wait?”

This prayer is full of devotion to God. The prayer celebrates the closest relationship between “your servant” and “my God.” After the first three verses, the entire psalm is prayer directly to God. It is almost impossible to read this psalm and not being praying to God. Each verse is its own prayer, and as we pray this psalm, we find ourselves praying all kinds of prayers.

One commentary called it a medley of prayers. They all center on God’s words and instructions to us. I divided the psalm roughly into thirds, and for the last three weeks I have been praying one third of this psalm every morning. There are some pretty interesting lines in there.

This psalm loves the law and shows warm devotion to God throughout. I grew up believing that the law spoils a good relationship with God, or something like that. This psalm completely overturns that idea. Almost every verse confronts that. When we pray this psalm, we have a warm honest relationship with God, and his law fills every part of that relationship. There is not a hint of legalism anywhere in this psalm.

Rather, in this psalm, the law is the best thing God could have given, because the law brings us to God, and the law is good for us in so many different ways.

## 3 Eight Words for “Law” – Psalm 119:57–64

Psalm 119 uses eight different terms for “law.” They each mean something a little different, but for the most part they are used synonymously. A few stanzas use all eight, and we’ll look at one of those, *Heth*, beginning in verse 57.

*You are my portion, Lord; I have promised to obey your **words**.*  
*I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your **promise**.*  
*I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your **statutes**.*  
*I will hasten and not delay to obey your **commands**.*  
*Though the wicked bind me with ropes, I will not forget your **law** (torah)*  
*At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous **rulings**.*  
*I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your **precepts**.*  
*The earth is filled with your love, Lord; teach me your **decrees**.*

All eight of these occur many times in Psalm 119, and that is probably why each stanza has eight lines. Different translations sometimes use different English words, because it’s not always clear what the best English word would be. But in this psalm that is not too important. What’s important is that these are all instructions from God himself.

We can hear in these words our devotion to God bound up with our love for God’s words:

*You are my portion, Lord; I have promised to obey your words.*  
*I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise....*  
*At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous rulings.*  
*I am a friend to all who fear you, to all who follow your precepts.*  
*The earth is filled with your love, Lord; teach me your decrees.*

The most frequent of the eight terms is *torah*. The simplest of the eight terms is “word.” “I have put my hope in your *word*,” In eleven (not ten) of the twenty-two stanzas, the first of the eight terms mentioned is “word.” “I have promised to obey your word.” “Give me understanding according to your word.” “Preserve my life according to your *word*.” Eleven of the twenty-two stanzas begin like that. “Word” is so simple. Our God has spoken. That’s the point. We have a God who speaks, and we have his words. It is very good.

## 4 Psalm 119 is an Acrostic Psalm

In an acrostic psalm, each line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So the first line begins with the Hebrew “a,” the second line with the Hebrew “b,” and so on. The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters. Besides Psalm 119, eight of our other psalms that are arranged that way. In Psalm 119, the first eight verses begin with Aleph, their “a,” and the next eight verses all begin with Beth, their “b,” and so on for 22 stanzas.

## 5 Ancient Prayer to an Unknown God

I am going to read you a sad ancient prayer, written about the same time as Psalm 119, prayed by someone who did not know the God of the Bible, and did not know God's ways in the Torah. It is the opposite of Psalm 119. It is not a good prayer. The person praying this is very sick.

This person knows some god or goddess is furious at him, but the person does not know which god, and he does not know what he's done wrong. It is a sad lost prayer. Because we have the Bible, we do not pray like this. Here it is:

May the fury of my god's heart be quieted toward me.  
May the god who is not known be quieted toward me.  
May the goddess who is not known be quieted toward me.  
May the god whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me.  
May the goddess whom I know or do not know be quieted toward me.  
May the heart of my god be quieted toward me.  
May the heart of my goddess be quieted toward me.  
May my god and goddess be quieted toward me.  
May the god who has become angry with me be quieted toward me.  
May the goddess who has become angry with me be quieted toward me.  
In ignorance I have eaten that forbidden by my god.  
In ignorance I have set foot on that prohibited by my goddess.  
O Lord, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.  
O my god, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.  
O god whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.  
O goddess whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are many; great are my sins;  
The transgression which I have committed, indeed I do not know.  
The sin which have done, indeed I do not know.  
The prohibited place on which I have set foot, indeed I do not know.  
The lord in the anger of his heart looked at me.  
The god in the rage of his heart confronted me.  
When the goddess was angry with me, she made me become ill.  
The god whom I know or do not know has oppressed me.  
The goddess whom I know or do not know has placed suffering upon me.  
Although I am constantly looking for help, no one takes me by the hand.  
When I weep they do not come to my side. I utter laments, but no one hears me.  
I am troubled; I am overwhelmed; I can not see.  
O my god, merciful one, I address to you the prayer, turn toward me.  
I kiss the feet of my goddess; I crawl before you.  
How long, O my goddess, whom I know or do not know, before your angry heart will be quieted? Man is dumb; he knows nothing; mankind, everyone that exists, what do they know?  
Whether they are committing sin or doing good; they do not even know.  
O my lord, do not throw your servant down.

He is plunged in the waters of a swamp; take him by the hand.  
The sin which I have done, turn into goodness.  
The transgression which I have committed, let the wind carry away.  
May my misdeeds strip off like clothing.  
O my god, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions.  
O my goddess, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions.  
O my god whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions. O goddess whom I know or do not know, my transgressions are seven times seven; remove my transgressions. Remove my transgressions and I will sing your praise.  
May your heart, like the heart of a real mother, be quieted toward me.  
Like a real mother and a real father may it be quieted toward me. Amen.

This prayer is desperate. Perhaps our living God heard this prayer and found a way to come to this person. I have no idea. But here's the thing, people: this person does not know the important things. This person has no idea which god or goddess he's dealing with, and he has no idea what this god or goddess might want or not want. This person has no idea what the angry god or goddess thinks is right or thinks is wrong.

And we do know, people. We know which God, and we know what God tells us to do and what that God tells us not to do. After reading this ancient prayer, Psalm 119 becomes one long celebration that we know which God we are dealing with, and we know his instructions.

We know that our God and his instructions are the best thing that could happen to us. God has come to us, he has introduced himself, and he has told us how to live. That ancient prayer makes Psalm 119 one long celebration. Now I will read to you a few of my favorite parts of this prayer.

#### 6 Teach Me, Turn My Heart, Turn My Eyes – Verses 33–37

*Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end.  
Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart.  
Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.  
Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.  
Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.*

#### 7 A Lament: When Will You Comfort Me? – Verses 81-88

*My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my hope in your word.  
My eyes fail, looking for your promise; I say, "When will you comfort me?" ...  
How long must your servant wait? When will you punish my persecutors?  
The arrogant dig pits to trap me, contrary to your law.  
All your commands are trustworthy; help me, for I am being persecuted without cause.  
They almost wiped me from the earth, but I have not forsaken your precepts.  
In your unfailing love preserve my life, that I may obey the statutes of your mouth.*

8 Wisdom – Verses 98–102

*Your commands are always with me, and make me wiser than my enemies.  
I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.  
I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.  
I have kept my feet from every evil path, so that I might obey your word.  
I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me.*

9 Last Stanza: Teach Me, Help me, Seek Me – Verses 169–176

*May my cry come before you, Lord; give me understanding according to your word.  
May my supplication come before you; deliver me according to your promise.  
May my lips overflow with praise, for you teach me your decrees.  
May my tongue sing of your word, for all your commands are righteous.  
May your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts.  
I long for your salvation, Lord, and your law gives me delight.  
Let me live that I may praise you, and may your laws sustain me.  
I have strayed like a lost sheep.  
Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands. Amen.*

**PRAYER:** We praise you God. You have come to us, to rescue us and show us your ways. Thank you for your words. May our cry come before you, Lord. Give us understanding according to your word. May our prayer come before you. Deliver us according to your promise. May our lips overflow with praise, for you teach us your ways. May our tongues sing of your word, for all your commands are righteous. May you hand be ready to help us, for we have chosen your ways. Lord, we have strayed like lost sheep, but we are still your servants. Seek for us, for we have not forgotten your commands. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:** The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.