

## Psalm 119

1. The psalmist's immersion in the law faithfully represents the old covenant in Deuteronomy (11:18-21). In the new covenant God promises, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord" (Jer 31:31-34). Despite the indwelling Spirit and the grace we've been shown, we may envy the psalmist's delight. Read vv. 9-16, 69-70, 145-148, 164-166. Is there anything we can learn from the psalmist's approach?
2. Read the quotes from Lewis on the psalmist's delight in the law. Why was the psalmist was in love with the Law?
3. Read 119:41-48. How does obedience to a set of ordinances bring "freedom" (45)? How do you "hope" in a legal system? (*Hint*: What does God promise in Deuteronomy to the obedient?)
4. Discuss the quotes from Lewis on the relationship between the Law and the surrounding religions of the day.
5. *Torah* can mean "law" but also "teaching" and "instruction", which are favored by the Jewish Publication Society. One commentator writes, "This more appropriate translation gives a different ring to the entire psalm and helps clear up a number of difficult passages."<sup>1</sup> Other words used of the law in 119 have a wider semantic range than you'd think from typical translations: "precepts" translates *piqqudim* and is drawn from the same word translated "tend to" in Jer 23:2; *edot* is translated "statutes" in 119:2 but also means "testimonies" (as in Joshua 24:27); and "laws" in 119:7 is *mispat* which is translated "right" in Gen 18:25 (also Ex 21:9), "manner" in Ex 26:30 and "specifications" in 1 Kings 6:38. McCallum says,

Christian thinking may have been massively influenced by the use of English words for God's leadership, teaching, counsel, or direction that are drawn from military or legal relationships in an unnecessary way. The same words are frequently translated in other ways. The overall result is a legalistic and impersonal spin on the picture of God's relation to his people.

Consider leaving a note for your teenage kids containing some instructions or reminders for what to do while you are gone on a trip—"Don't forget to feed the dog. Lock the doors when you go to school, etc." What would be a good heading for such a note? How about "Commands for while I'm gone," or, "Household statutes?" How about "Household ordinances?" All of these seem not to fit a communication suitable to the parent-child relationship, let alone for a husband-wife relationship. Imagine a note from your wife saying "Don't forget my regulation: to pick up the kids from grandma's house."<sup>2</sup>

How does it change your reading of 119 if the Psalmist is besotted with God's *teaching*?

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*Fun fact*: The Benedictine practice of the seven daily offices (lauds, prime, tierce, sext, none, vespers and complin) is based on Psalm 119:147, 164. "At each office the monks recited psalms with refrains, and versicles, punctuated by silent prayer, a hymn, and readings from the Scriptures and from patristic commentaries on those Scriptures. In Benedict's day the practice was to recite the entire 150 psalms within a week's time." (*CH&B*, issue 28)

*Fun quote*: "For the purpose, therefore, of rendering [meditation] less irksome to the reader, the prophet has distinguished every successive eight verses by their beginning each with the corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and thus all excuses, on the score of ignorance, are removed, even from the callous and slothful." (Calvin)

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<sup>1</sup> James Limburg, *Psalms* (Westminster John Knox, 2000), 414.

<sup>2</sup> "Legalism in Translation", <https://www.xenos.org/essays/legalism-translation>.

## C. S. Lewis on the Torah Psalms (1, 19, 119)

### From *Reflections on the Psalms*

#### *On the psalmist's delight in the Law:*

This [Joshua 1:8<sup>3</sup>] means, among other things, that the Law was a study or, as we should say, a 'subject'; a thing on which there would be commentaries, lectures, and examinations. There were. Thus part of what an ancient Jew meant when he said he 'delighted in the Law', was very like what one of us would mean if he said that somebody 'loved' history, of physics, or archaeology. [56]

The Order of the Divine mind, embodied in the Divine Law, is beautiful. What should a man do but try to reproduce it, so far as possible, in his daily life? His 'delight' is in those statutes (16); to study them is like finding treasure (14); they affect him like music, are his 'songs' (54); they taste like honey (103); they are better than silver and gold (72). As one's eyes are more and more opened, one sees more and more in them, and it excites wonder (18). This is not priggery nor even scrupulosity; it is the language of a man ravished by a moral beauty. If we cannot at all share his experience, we shall be the losers. [59]

#### *On the contrast of the Law with other religions:*

For there were other roads, which lacked 'truth'. The Jews had as their immediate neighbors, close to them in race as well as in position, Pagans whose religion was marked by none of that beauty or (sometimes) wisdom which we can find among the Greeks. That background made the 'beauty' or 'sweetness' of the Law more visible; not least because these neighboring Paganisms were a constant temptation to the Jew and may in some of their externals have been not unlike his own religion. The temptation was to turn to those terrible rites in times of terror—when, for example, the Assyrians were pressing on. We who not so long ago waited daily for invasion by enemies, like the Assyrians, skilled and constant in systematic cruelty, know how they may have felt. They were tempted, since the Lord seemed deaf, to try those appalling deities who demanded so much more and might therefore perhaps give more in return. But when a Jew in some happier hour, or a better Jew even in that hour, looked at those worships—when he thought of sacred prostitution, sacred sodomy, and the babies thrown into the fire for Moloch—his own 'Law' as he turned back to it must have shone with an extraordinary radiance. [62]

In so far as this idea of the Law's beauty, sweetness, or preciousness, arose from the contrast of the surrounding Paganisms, we may soon find occasion to recover it. Christians increasingly live on a spiritual island; new and rival ways of life surround it in all directions and their tides come further up the beach every time. None of these new ways is yet so filthy or cruel as some Semitic Paganism. But many of them ignore all individual rights and are already cruel enough. Some give morality a wholly new meaning which we cannot accept, some deny its possibility. Perhaps we shall all learn, sharply enough, to value the clean air and 'sweet reasonableness' of the Christian ethics which in a more Christian age we might have taken for granted. [64-65]

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<sup>3</sup> "Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."

## Leader's Notes

Psalm 119 is well known as the longest chapter of the Bible, one of three psalms focused on the *torah* (1, 19, 119). It is an acrostic psalm composed of 22 8-verse stanzas in which each stanza's verses begin with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. (There are other acrostics in the pss but this is the only one which has each verse begin with the particular letter like this.) As C. S. Lewis says (*Reflections on the Psalms*, 58-59), the structure shows it's not simply an outpouring of the heart like, say, 18. Rather, "it is a pattern, a thing done like embroidery, stitch by stitch, through long, quiet hours, for love of the subject and for the delight in leisurely, disciplined craftsmanship." One might add to this, though, that the psalm wasn't composed in peace: The young (99-100) psalmist is isolated (19), and faces opposition (86, 141) of various forms, including scorn and contempt (22, 42), slander (23, 69), shaming (39) and maybe worse (61, 85, 109). But despite being laid low (25) and sorrowful (28) the psalm's tone is hope and delight. That's what makes this psalm so interesting. The goal of this discussion is to pry open this enigma and understand why the psalmist delights in, of all things, and in such circumstances, the *law*.

A good argument can be made (based on the terms he uses; see *Dictionary of the OT: Wisdom Lit's* entry on the Law) that the law the psalmist is delighting (16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174) in, panting (131) and zealous (139) for is specifically that of Deuteronomy. Deut presents the Law but is more than just a list of rules: It is a covenant with blessings and curses, but pains are often taken by Moses to explain *why* the laws are there and to ground them in God's love and faithfulness.

With this in mind, let's set the stage by reading a few passages from Deuteronomy...

## Selections from Deuteronomy

*Israel is called to immersion in the Lord's teachings:*

11:18-21: 18 Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 19 Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 20 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, 21 so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.

*A covenant of love, with promises of blessings and curses:*

7:7 The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. 8 But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. 10 But those who hate him he will repay to their face by destruction; he will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him. 11 Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today.

30:11 Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. 12 It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 14 No,

the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

15 See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. 16 For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

*Laws which are righteous and merciful:*

24:5 If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.

6 Do not take a pair of millstones—not even the upper one—as security for a debt, because that would be taking a person's livelihood as security.

7 If someone is caught kidnapping a fellow Israelite and treating or selling them as a slave, the kidnapper must die. You must purge the evil from among you.

*The beauty of the torah:*

32:1-4: Listen, you heavens, and I will speak;  
hear, you earth, the words of my mouth.

2 Let my teaching fall like rain  
and my words descend like dew,  
like showers on new grass,  
like abundant rain on tender plants.

3 I will proclaim the name of the Lord.  
Oh, praise the greatness of our God!

4 He is the Rock, his works are perfect,  
and all his ways are just.

A faithful God who does no wrong,  
upright and just is he.

## What does the psalmist *do* in Psalm 119?

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

**10 I seek you** with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.

11 I have **hidden your word in my heart** that I might not sin against you.

12 Praise be to you, Lord; teach me your decrees.

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

14 **I rejoice** in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.

15 **I meditate** on your precepts and consider your ways.

16 **I delight**<sup>4</sup> in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.

69: Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, **I keep your precepts with all my heart**.

70 Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but **I delight in your law**.

145 **I call with all my heart**; answer me, Lord, and I will obey your decrees.

146 **I call out to you**; save me and I will keep your statutes.

147 **I rise before dawn and cry for help**; I have put my hope in your word.

148 **My eyes stay open through the watch**

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

165 Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.

166 **I wait for your salvation**, Lord, and I follow your commands. es of the night, that I may **meditate on your promises**.

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<sup>4</sup> "Delight" occurs nine times in the NIV translation of 119.