

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris shares what she calls "the scariest story" she's ever heard about the Bible. Norris and her husband were visiting a man named Arlo, a rugged, self-made man who was facing terminal cancer. During their visit, Arlo started talking about his grandfather, a sincere Christian. The grandfather gave Arlo and his bride a wedding present: an expensive leather Bible with their names printed in gold lettering. Arlo left it in the box and never opened it. But for months afterwards his grandfather kept asking if he liked the Bible. Arlo told Norris, "The wife had written a nice thank-you note, and we'd thanked him in person, but somehow he couldn't let it lie, he always had to ask about it."

Finally, Arlo grew curious enough to open the Bible. *"The joke was on me,"* Arlo said. *"I finally took that Bible out of the closet and I found that granddad had placed a twenty-dollar bill at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, and at the beginning of every book ... over thirteen hundred dollars in all. And he knew I'd never find it."*ⁱ

- B. It's funny—actually, *scary*—how Arlo still on old age thought that the treasure his grandfather had given him was the \$1300 and not the Bible.
- C. We've been looking at **Psalm 119** these last four Sundays because this 176-verse psalm is a kind of A-to-Z compendium of the riches we find in Scripture. **V.7** says, *"I love your commands more than gold, more than pure gold."* More than I'd love \$1300. Today we look at two more reasons to treasure the Bible, set it the form of two prayers to the great God who speaks to us here. Turn to **Ps. 119:89-91**.

Illus.: 1968 was a terrible year in America. Both Martin Luther King Jr and Bobby Kennedy had been assassinated. The Democratic Convention in Chicago turned into terrible riots and brutality. Everywhere there were violent marches in the streets against the Vietnam war. It seemed like our country was coming apart at the seams.

Then, late in December the U.S. launched Apollo 8 and on Dec. 24, 1968, three Apollo 8 astronauts—**William Anders, James Lovell, and Frank Borman**—were orbiting the earth. It was the first manned spacecraft to leave earth's orbit, then it orbited the moon ten times. They were the first people to see the earth as a whole planet, the first to see the far side of the moon, and the first to witness an earthrise. Millions of astonished Americans watched grainy black and white images transmitted from the capsule. It was the biggest TV audience in history. On that Christmas Eve Americans heard William Anders address them: *"We are now approaching lunar sunrise, and for all the people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send to you. 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.'"* And each of the three astronauts read, in turn, Genesis 1:1-10. It was an extraordinarily fitting gift for an earth torn by conflict from a place in God's well-ordered heavens.

Ps. 119:89-91 says... Do you see the emphasis on the heavens and earth? Like us, this psalmist lived in turmoil, where most gave little or no attention to God's word. So this man prays, in effect, *"LORD, no matter what **people** believe or do, your word is what established and ordered the stars. The heavens do what you say. They show that your faithfulness to your own word doesn't change from one generation to the next. Ages ago you established the earth and it simply endures because your laws governing it endure. 'Your word, LORD, is eternal.' Nothing is more dependable!"*

V.91, “Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.”

The ways of everything in creation, from the farthest star to the blades of grass, are ordered by the Lord. There really aren’t laws of nature; they are the laws of God. Nature doesn’t actually run *naturally*; it runs *obediently*. John Ruskin wrote, “*From the ministering of the Archangel to the labour of the insect, from the poisoning of the planets to the gravitation of a grain of dust, the power and glory of all creatures, and all matter, consists in their obedience, not their freedom.*” Do you see that? “*The power and glory of all creatures, and all matter, consists in their obedience, not their freedom.*” So that leads him to pray in **v.92**, “*if your law had not been my delight I would have perished in my affliction.*” **Like a planet loosened from God’s gravity.** So here is a prayer for us as we open our Bibles:

I. LORD, I WANT YOUR WORD TO HAVE AS FIRM A FOOTING IN MY LIFE AS IT DOES IN THE HEAVENS

A. *Illus.*: I didn’t see the movie *Gravity* but just the previews gave me the willies. Just the *poster!* An astronaut on a spacewalk. An explosion or something! And the tether is cut. The astronaut drifts helplessly, hopelessly, off into space, getting smaller and smaller in the lonely black.

The psalmist doesn’t want that to happen to him spiritually. God’s word holds all the universe in place but *human beings* can cut themselves loose from God by ignoring his law—his ways and precepts and good news. So this man prays: **vv.92-95...**

B. This guy was under tremendous pressure of some kind, pressure from wicked people who wanted to destroy him. The real danger wasn’t their plots, it was that, under all that pressure, he’d become untethered from God’s ways—from the God-blessed life. Pressure will do that to us. (Unfortunately, so will ease and prosperity.)

- C. So he's under attack, he's the underdog, no match for the pressure he's facing. *"I would have perished in my affliction."* But he knew the secret of spiritual safety. His defense was to run to God's word. **Do this:**
1. He tells God, ***Your law—your torah, your teaching—is my delight.*** He'd think about God's word—the stories of Abraham and Moses, Joshua and David, the commands, the symbols and signs, the words and deeds of the prophets, and his heart lifted. **His grip on God tightened.**
 2. He tells God ***he will never forget God's precepts; that he sought them out.*** Precepts are principles, like, *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength."* Like *"The LORD is my shepherd. I shall lack nothing."* Like, *"The LORD dwells in a high and holy place, but also with those who are humble and contrite in heart."* And *"Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow."* **And his grip on God tightened.**
 3. He was surrounded by the wicked—by terrifying trouble and temptations to abandon righteousness but his defense was: ***"I will ponder your statutes."*** What a counter-intuitive defense. But in God's statutes he'd be reminded, *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding, but in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your ways straight."* Or the story of David and Goliath. *"I will ponder your statutes—your ways, your precepts."* **And his grip on God tightened.**
- D. Remember what he prayed in **v.91**, *"Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you."* That means our loving

God can employ anything in his universe to help us. I came across these lyrics to an old hymn:

Say not, my soul, 'From whence

Can God relieve my care?'

Remember that Omnipotence

Has servants everywhere. [Thomas Toke Lynch]

- E. You can almost feel his sigh of relief in v.96, “To all perfection I see a limit, but your commands are boundless.” Perhaps he was thinking again of the night sky seemingly infinite, yet he knows that like all that God has created, somewhere out there is a boundary. But he can ponder the words and ways of God endlessly—for all eternity—because, as *The Message* puts it, “*the horizons cannot contain your commands.*” So we pray, **Lord, I want your word to have as firm a footing in my life as it does in the heavens.**

Now, look to the next section, **vv.97-104**. Each of the eight lines in this Hebrew prayer begin with the letter *mem*. Listen... [vv.97-104]. Here's a short version of that prayer:

II. LORD, YOU HAVE GIVEN ME A TASTE FOR THE HONEYED WISDOM OF YOUR WORD

- A. Throughout this long psalm the writer has told us all sorts of reasons for loving God's word. Here, his reason is that loving God's law gives me every advantage in life.
1. **V.98**, “*Your commands are always with me...*” In other words, *I've learned them. They are at the center of how I think. “Your commands are always with me, and make me wiser than my enemies.”* The enemies of our souls are shrewd and sly and conniving, but they're not wise. They're fools. They don't know the first thing about how real life works or how God is the ally of

those who trust him. They don't know what matters or what lasts. They're oblivious to their own weaknesses and hopeless future. Godly people, even when beset by trouble and troublemakers, are wise. We know about God's power and love, we know about loving and praying for our enemies, we know that Jesus triumphed over Satan himself by dying on the cross. Loving God's word gives us the advantage of wisdom over our enemies.

2. **V.99**, "*I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes.*" Our school teachers taught us 'reading, writing, and 'rithmetic', they taught us history and biology and music. But no one can teach *spiritual insight* half so well as the Bible. Loving God's word gives us an advantage over our teachers.
3. **V.100**, "*I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.*" Even the old men and women, rich in experience and seasoned in life, are not as understanding as the one who loves God's word.

Notice he says, "*for I **obey** your precepts.*"

Understanding God's ways is not merely a matter of study, nor even of reflection. Obeying God's word gives us understanding. We grow wise in the *doing*.

God's precepts are not only the Bible's dos and don'ts. These are the precepts of grace—that Jesus died for our sins and offers us his salvation freely if we simply ask him to save us. God's precept is that those who come to him as humbly as little children will be welcomed into his kingdom. God's precept is that "*in this world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer. Christ has overcome the world.*"

- B. So what would we see if we could follow someone like this around? Vv.101-102.... We'd see him staying out of moral back alleys, turning aside from the carnival midway of lies, not venturing into darkness without the light of God's word showing him where to put his feet. Even before acts of obedience are simply avoiding evil paths and streets unmarked by God's laws. Someone told me yesterday, *"If you were to fall badly into sin five years from now, you already know right now what would happen."* So set up roadblocks to those streets; stay away from those alleys.
- C. Finally, listen to **vv.103-104...** Because he obeyed God's word, because he meditated on it, and used it as his defense, God gave him a taste for his word; he had a sweet tooth for Scripture. This man had never tasted anything sweeter than honey. Never had sugary stuff, no dessert tables and cookie mountains, no chocolate piñata. But *honey!* Oh, he loved the taste of precious, rare honey. There was nothing so sweet. And when he thought of the hours he'd meditated on Scripture, how he'd seen the wisdom opening up as he obeyed God, how his spirits had been lifted and his unuttered prayers given words—well, nothing in all his life was so sweet.

And *he'd* never met Jesus. He'd never held the New Testament! He'd never had the Holy Spirit illumine God's Word as we do. He'd never read where Jesus said, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* He'd never read, *"Surely, I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."* Or, *"I go to prepare a place for you ... and I will come back so where I am you can be also."* He'd never read, *"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,"* nor *"The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout ... and*

we will meet the Lord in the air.” He’d never read of John’s vision of heaven where “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Conclusion

Psalm 119 gives us prayers which we can use to lift God’s Word to our hearts. Like these two today:

- Lord, I want your word to have as firm a footing in my life as it does in the heavens.
- Lord, you have given me a taste for the honeyed wisdom of your word.

Illus.: My wife, Susan, is an avid collector of quotes. A few months ago she read John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* and came across this one: *“Give me a used Bible and I will, I think, be able to tell you about a man by the places that are edged with the dirt of seeking fingers.”*

ⁱ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 95. In PreachingToday.com