

**Introduction:**

- A. Eugene Peterson wrote a wonderful with a title taken from something God's angel told his prophet: "Eat this book." In it he told this story:

*A few years ago while in Israel, my wife and I were invited to an Orthodox Jewish synagogue for morning prayers. We were in the little Galilean village of Hoshia. It was seven-thirty in the morning. There were fourteen or fifteen boys and young men ranging in age from about twelve to seventeen, along with a scattering of older men. The boys were reading the Bible – it was a large scroll that two boys ceremoniously removed from its place ("the ark"), placed reverently on a reading desk, and unrolled to the place of the assigned reading for the morning. They handled it so reverently, so proudly. And then one of them read, but he only seemed to read for he had memorized it, the entire Torah, the first five books of the Bible. We later learned that all the boys had memorized it in its entirety – knew it by heart from beginning to end. And they were so unselfconscious about what they were doing, so boyish, so obviously comfortable and joyful in what they were doing.*

*.... They were the furthest things from reluctant schoolboys having to do their lessons, or pious schoolboys trying to impress God with their devotion. They were just boys, but boys who had discovered with delight how the Bible works in them, revealing a living God for their living, these Scriptures being digested within them as they came together every morning to eat the book.*

B. That is a picture of the way Psalm 119 calls us to delight in Scripture. Turn there. We don't know who wrote this psalm nor when it was written. Many scholars think it was written late in Israel's OT history. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible—176 verses. It's really like 22 chapters—22 sections of eight verses each. You might say that the 'title' of each section is a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In each of those 22 sections the first word of each of those eight verses starts with that letter. So vv.1-8 is *aleph* and each of the eight lines starts with *aleph*. Vv.9-16 is *beth* and each of the lines starts with *beth*, and so on.

If that's not impressive enough, there are **eight synonyms used for God's Word, and most of them appear in every one of those 22 sections.** The eight synonyms, each occurring over 20 times in this Psalm, have slightly different meanings but are often used almost interchangeably. They are (depending on your translation) *law (torah), testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, ordinances, word, and promise (also word).*

**C. S. Lewis** wrote that it "*is not, and does not pretend to be, a sudden outpouring of the heart ... It is a pattern, a thing done like embroidery, stitch by stitch, through long, quiet hours, for the love of the subject and for the delight in leisurely, disciplined craftsmanship.*" [Wilcock, p.193]

C. **Most importantly, it is a majestic spiritual gift** to us. Maybe you've come to this psalm in your reading and felt like it was something you just had to plough through, making for extra-long morning devotions. **But this psalm is written to give us a taste for God's Word.** The goal of Ps. 119 is our full, wholehearted and delighted understanding of and obedience to all God teaches and commands in Scripture.

D. Over the next four weeks we'll look at four parts of this psalm to at least taste the delights served here. The first two sections—*aleph* and *beth*—form a kind of introduction to the whole psalm. Listen to **vv.1-3....**

**I. GOD'S LAW GIVES STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS DIRECTLY TO THE TREASURES OF THE GOD-BLESSED LIFE (119:1-8)**

A. The first word that came to the psalmist's mind when he thought of God's law was *Blessed!* In fact, it's almost as if he speaks it with a satisfied sigh: "*Ahh... blessed; so blessed!*" Not "*blessed are those who have the Scriptures*" but "*Blessed are those whose ways are blameless because they have the Scriptures.*" The Bible is a treasure because it leads to good and godly lives. **God's laws are step-by-step instructions into the life of God's promises.**

When v.1 says, "*blessed are those whose ways are blameless,*" he doesn't mean sinless, but that both by obedience and faith in the forgiveness of God he lives without guilt and God's disfavor hanging over his head.

B. When we hear the words in these 8 vss.—*law of the LORD, statutes, ways, precepts, decrees, commands, righteous laws*—we naturally think of things like the Ten Commandments, and all the Bible's do's-and-don'ts. But the law of the LORD—the *torah*—encompasses all Scripture, not just the commands. Like the stories of Abraham and David, the descriptions of the tabernacle, the book of Job, and all that the prophets wrote. Now, we believe that God's *torah—teaching*—includes both Old and New Testaments. This psalm invites into all God teaches—the way of life God lays out for his people.

Furthermore, “*walking according to the law of the LORD*” isn’t just about doing what we’re told, keeping rules—though it is certainly that!

- To obey is to let our minds and consciences be shaped by God’s teaching which always runs against the grain of the world’s way of thinking and acting.
- Obedience means elevating our thoughts and desires through Scripture while we jettison the sordid and silly story lines and songs of this world.
- Obedience means to think on things that are noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable.
- Obedience is to relish and rely on God’s promises, made sure in Christ. It is to think on the Bible’s stories, laying them over our own, so we might see our lives in proper focus.
- “*Walking according the law of the LORD*” is to gladly look through the pages of Scripture to the backstage of time and heaven to see the wonders and mysteries of God.

C. Notice **v.2**, “*Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.*” This is no soul-killing legalism. This is someone following a treasure map. We don’t pick up our Bibles to learn details or scriptural curiosities. **We use our Bibles to seek God with all our hearts.** Have you ever tried to seek God *without* a Bible? It’s hard, and it’s not a good idea. It isn’t that the Bible will necessarily answer your particular question but that the Bible draws you into the heart and mind of God where you will find grace and truth. **I tell people facing difficult times to take in the Bible like medicine.** You don’t have to just read verses about your need or problem. Read *anywhere* in Scripture and your heart will be strengthened.

D. Listen to vv.4-8... What do you hear the psalmist saying there? I'd like nothing more than to steadfastly and completely obey God's ways. He's already said that the life he wants—the God-blessed life—is blameless. So now in v.6 he says, *“If I was steadfastly, consistently, obedient to God's word I could face God's commands without red-faced regret. No shame. No regrets. I'd love to live like that!”* One of the delights of loving and obeying God's word is that we don't have to live with shame. Remember, God's law offers redemption and forgiveness as well as righteous ways to think and act. What a great gift! Who wouldn't want that!?

V.7... I suspect there have been times when you came to worship knowing you have not kept God's commands that week. You come with a guilty conscience. We're glad, of course, that Jesus forgives us and that we will hear that in church, but **it is so much better to come to praise God with an upright heart, isn't it?** And that's possible because we have God's Word!

V.8... *I'm committed to keeping your commands, Lord, so “don't ever walk off and leave me!”* [The Message] God wouldn't do that, of course, but this is an expression of our dependence. When we choose to disobey God we walk off and leave *him*. So walking with God is how we stick close together.

The next section is *Beth* and v.9 gives us it's heading:

## II. “HOW CAN A YOUNG PERSON STAY ON THE PATH OF PURITY? BY LIVING ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.”

A. This has the sound of the Proverbs, which so often address the young. He doesn't just mean sexual purity here. He means a life that doesn't have all kinds of junk stirred into

it, a life untainted with streaks and strains of sin. Were the psalmist preaching here this morning he'd look around and point at the students—at teenagers and young adults. *“How are you going to stay on the holy path throughout your life? I'll tell you how. By living according to Gods' word.”* Maybe he'd say, *“Hold up your Bibles! Wrap your heads and your hearts around that book. Do what it says. Learn to think like Scripture thinks. Love what Scripture tells you to love. And when you come to the end of life your heart won't be grimy, stained and pock-marked; you won't be disappointed at what you've become. You'll be a gift to those around you.”*

- B. Notice how **v.10** is like **v.2** above. He's praying here: *“I seek you, **Lord**, with all my heart.”* The Bible is a means to that end. **God becomes clear and close to obedient believers, to the Bible-minded.**
- C. **V.11** is very familiar... This verse is why so many Christians memorize Scripture and work with their kids to memorize it. Scripture embedded in our hearts is a kind of firewall against the viruses of sin. **Memorizing** is one way to store Scripture in your heart. There are other ways. **Obeying** scripture, for example. Obedience creates a kind of spiritual muscle memory. Eugene Peterson quotes Rainer Maria Rilke, who pictures a reader who *“does not always remain bent over his pages: he often leans back and closes his eyes over a line he has been reading again, and its meaning spreads through his blood.”* [p.4]
- D. **Vv.12-3...** Here's the idea of praise and rejoicing again. How does he praise the LORD? By *recounting God's laws; God's teaching.* We say things like, *“I was reading the story of David today and I loved the part where...”* That's praise to God! The other night at our Elders' meeting

Pastor Jamie read a long passage from Job about seeking wisdom. We were moved by it. That's praise. We worked our way through the life of Abraham and were touched and thankful by what we learned. That's praise. On Sunday, Jan. 1, we asked people to share in this service what passages they go to in uncertain times. Recounting those verses was as good as singing. Do that on your own. Tell God what you love about a passage, what you learned.

- E. **V.14... Not only do we recount God's laws, we celebrate the privilege of obeying them like we just hit the jackpot!** I'd never really thought about this before. When I've been obedient to God I tend to think, *"That's the least you can do."* But the psalmist here *rejoiced* when he followed God's statutes because he saw it as another step on the pathway of God's blessing. *"Lord, I'm so thankful you taught me about being humble because I would have never known that. Thank you for helping me to obey."*
- F. **Vv.15-16... Here the emphasis is not on doing but on considering, meditating, contemplating God's ways.** To look into God's Word is something like looking at great art or listening to great music. I've been to the Art Institute. I stroll through looking for something I recognize. But I hear about people who sit in front of one painting all afternoon, soaking it in, seeing more and more of the genius and beauty, noticing colors or brushstrokes. I'm envious of them. But we can do that with God's Word.

Sometimes we have the feeling that we need to get through *a lot* of Scripture. That doesn't work for me personally. I like to mull over a passage. Go slow. Stay in one place. Sometimes someone will comment on how much more I find in a passage than they do. They assume, I supposed, that it is due to scholarship, to commentaries and

the like. But most of it is simply thinking, what Peterson calls “*contemplative exegesis*.” Asking questions of a text.

**I pester a passage.** *Wait, what do you mean? Why does it say that next? Why that word?* **Pray it out. Paraphrase it.**

*Illus.:* I know nothing at all about wine. But I’m intrigued with wine tasters, with the way they sip and swirl and smack. They have this whole weird vocabulary to describe what they taste. They can tell one year from another! I want to come to the Bible like that! When we meditate on God’s word the result will be delight. “*I delight in your decrees.*”

G. **Bottom line:** “*I will not neglect your word.*” Would you repeat that after me: “*I will not neglect your word.*”