

## A Reflective Approach to Scripture

### Psalm 119

Twenty-eight years ago, last week, as a freshman in college I attended a week-long Christian student conference in Fort Worth, TX. The trip about didn't happen. The day or so before we were to leave, we had a big snowstorm in NE. But after much prayer and discussion the leadership of our group decided that we would go. I remember riding down in an old van that didn't really have a functioning heater. But, hey, we were a bunch of college students, so who needs a heater, right?

That conference was life-changing for me. One of the most life-changing decisions that I made at that conference was a decision to regularly read God's Word. One of the speakers challenged us to do what he called a *31 Day Experiment*, which was a challenge to spend time reading and reflecting on God's Word daily for thirty-one straight days. I made a commitment to do the *31 Day Experiment* and thirty-eight days later I finished. I didn't quite get the daily thing down, but "experiment" gave me new appreciation and passion for God's Word. As I began to regularly read and think about God's Word and pray about how to apply it to my life, it became fuel for my soul like never before.

Twenty-eight years later it is still my desire to regularly be in God's Word. However, there are times I waver in my desire. Sometimes I struggle to spend time in God's Word in a way that is nourishing to my spiritual life. Sometimes I just get busy and distracted and I find it hard to set down and be quiet before the Lord to read and reflect on His Word. And so sometimes I need to sort of back up and be reminded of what a wonderful thing God's Word is.

A few weeks ago I decided to spend about a month reading and re-reading Psalm 119 in hopes that God would sort of refresh my desire to be in His Word. If you are not familiar with Psalm 119, it's the longest Psalm in the book of Psalms. It has 176 verses and in nearly every verse the psalmist speaks of God's Word. It is a psalm of devotion to God and His Word.

As I read there were several questions I was asking. The first was this:

#### I. What Does God's Word do in Our Lives?

What did it do in the psalmist's life and therefore what can we expect it to do in our lives?

This morning I want to share eight things that Psalm 119 says God's Word does in our lives. My hope for each of us is that whether these things are brand new or if they are simply a reminder, is that all of us would have a fresh desire to seek God through His Word because of this reminder.

And so, first, **God's Word gives wisdom, insight and understanding.**

Psalm 119:98-100 says this:

*<sup>98</sup> Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies, For they are ever mine. <sup>99</sup> I have more insight than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation. <sup>100</sup> I understand more than the aged, Because I have observed Your precepts.*

This is not a prideful assertion of the psalmist, but rather a recognition that what God gives through His Word is far superior to any kind of human wisdom and learning. Through God's Word, he is *wiser than* [his] *enemies*. He has *more insight than all* [his] *teachers*. He more understanding than the aged. How? Because he has observed God's precepts. He has paid attention to them and ordered his life around them and through them he has gained wisdom, insight and understanding.

Do you have any need for wisdom or for insight in any situations in your life? Any need for understanding? God's Word gives this.

Second, **God's Word keeps us from sin.**

*<sup>9</sup> How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word. <sup>10</sup> With all my heart I have sought You; Do not let me wander from Your commandments. <sup>11</sup> Your word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against You.*

The question is asked, "*How can a young man keep his way pure?*" The answer is by keeping it according to God's Word. The psalmist says that he sought God and he *treasured* God's Word in his heart so that he might *not sin against* God.

If a young man or a young woman or anyone else will orient his or her life around God's commandments it will keep one's way pure. It is through the Word of God that we find out what a pleasing life looks like - what a pure life looks like. We find guidance and we find power to live a life that pleases God through His Word.

But it doesn't just happen; it happens as we, like the psalmist, seek God with all our heart and treasures God's word in our heart.

Do you have a desire to not sin against God? Treasure God's Word in your heart.

Third, **God Word provides light to one's path.** Verse 105 says:

*<sup>105</sup> Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.*

And verse 130 says:

<sup>130</sup> *The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple.*

This past summer we went to Silver Dollar City and during the day we did the cave tour. At one point on the tour they shut off all the lights and we standing there in complete darkness. The last thing anyone wants to do in that situation is to move. You feel you might trip or worse fall off a ledge of something. Walking in darkness is a scary thing. All of us were thankful when they turned the lights back on because when they were on we could see the path. We could see the dangers to be avoided.

God's Word is a light to our path in this world. It makes clear the direction that we are to go. It reveals dangers that we should avoid. As you are traveling through life, do you sense a need light for the journey? God's Word does this.

Fourth, **God's Word sustains.** Verse 116 says:

<sup>116</sup> *Sustain me according to Your word, that I may live; And do not let me be ashamed of my hope.*

The psalmist prays that God would sustain him *according to* [God's] *word*. The root meaning of *sustain* is "to lean upon." It's the picture of someone putting his hands upon you to uphold you and to sustain you. That's what God's Word does.

Are there any areas of your life where you need to be sustained by God through His Word?

Fifth, **God's Word gives peace.** Verse 165 says:

<sup>165</sup> *Those who love Your law have great peace, And nothing causes them to stumble.*

The Hebrew word for *peace* is, shalom. It's a word that can mean, "well-being," or "prosperity," or "bodily health." It expresses the state of being at ease, satisfied, fulfilled (NIDOTTE, 131). If you have shalom things are well with your soul.

The psalmist says that *those who love* [God's] *law* have this peace. The *have great peace*. To *love* God's Word is to obey it and to order one's life around God's Word. Those who do have peace and nothing causes them to stumble.

Do you need peace in your life? Do you want to have a sense of well-being regardless of what your circumstances are? Then love God's Word. Order you life around it.

Sixth, **God's Word revives.**

*I will never forget Your precepts, For by them You have revived me.*

According to my count, nine different times in Psalm 119, the psalmist says something to this effect that God's Word revives. God's word gives life; it quickens; it brings refreshment; it restores life to the dead or dying; it causes growth. God's Word does this.

Do you need the life that God's Word can breathe into your soul? Do you need spiritual refreshment? God's Word revives.

Seventh, **God's Word counsels.** Verse 24 says:

*Your testimonies also are my delight; They are my counselors.*

One of the best things a person can do when they are faced with a difficult situation or decision is to have wise people around them who will listen and then offer good counsel - counsel that will protect from harm; counsel that reveals wisdom; counsel that gives insight into the right course of action. The psalmist says that God's testimonies do that. They are his counselors. They give him wisdom and insight. They give him encouragement.

Do you need counsel in any area of your life? Do you need the wisdom that wise counsel gives? God's Word counsels.

Finally, **God's word makes blessed the one who walks in it.** This, I believe, is really the fruit of all the things that we've looked at. Verse 1 and 2 say:

*How blessed are those whose way is blameless, Who walk in the law of the LORD. <sup>2</sup> How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, Who seek Him with all their heart.*

To be *blessed* is to be truly happy. This is the fruit of walking in the ways of God's Word. For those who do, they experience a deep, abiding joy and happiness. They are blessed. God's Word produces this as we orient our lives around it.

Do you want to be truly happy? Do you want to be the blessed person? God's Word does this.

And so, what does God's Word do in our lives? A lot! God's Word gives wisdom, insight and understanding. It keeps one from sin. It provides light for one's path. It sustains. It gives peace. It revives. It counsels. It is the source of the blessed life. And Psalm 119 says more, but you get the idea - God's Word can do amazing in our lives.

This leads to a second question and that is this:

## **II. How Do We Receive these Benefits from God's Word?**

Do we receive them just because we say we believe the Bible? Do we receive them because we have a Bible laying on our night stand? Do we receive them just because we read the Bible?

I believe that the psalmist would say and that it is clear from his experience that **we receive the benefits of God's Word as we orient our lives around it**. It is not just hearing and knowing what God's Word says. The psalmist said:

*<sup>33</sup> Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, And I shall observe it to the end. <sup>34</sup> Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law And keep it with all my heart.*

And in verse 60 he said:

*<sup>60</sup> I hastened and did not delay To keep Your commandments.*

He was committed to obeying God's Word. And it was out of this commitment to whole-hearted obedience that he experienced the fruit of God's Word in his life. If we want to experience these benefits, we too need to orient our lives around God's Word. We need to be committed to obedience. And I think that most of us would say that's what we want. We want to have a life that is oriented around God's Word.

Well, that leads me to one other observation from my reading of Psalm 119 that I believe is critical if we want to move from an experience of Scripture that is mostly about head knowledge to one of obedience. The psalmist had an approach to Scripture that I believe helped him move from knowledge and awareness of what God's Word says to obedience. **He had a reflective approach to Scripture.**

The psalmist said this in verse 97:

*<sup>97</sup> O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.*

And in verse 148:

*<sup>148</sup> My eyes anticipate the night watches, That I may meditate on Your word.*

The psalmist meditated on God's Word. He carefully thought about what is said. I believe that being reflective in our approach to God's Word is critical for us if we want to orient our lives around God's Word and therefore experience what God's Word can do in our lives.

Do you remember the REVEAL *Spiritual Life Survey* that we did as a church last April? Many of you helped by taking that survey. Over the past several years, thousands and thousands of people have been surveyed in hundreds of churches through this research. This research is looking at what creates growth in one's spiritual journey. In

one of the conclusions of the researches they make a statement that I think is very significant to what we are looking at this morning.

Here's what they said:

Everywhere we turned the data revealed the same truth: spending time in the Bible is hands down the highest impact personal spiritual practice. More specifically, "I reflect on the meaning of Scripture in my life" is the spiritual practice that is most predictive of growth for all three spiritual movements.

And when we talk about growth, we are talking about a life that is increasingly oriented around God's Word. And the research says that it doesn't matter if you are just starting out on your spiritual journey or if you are a long time committed follower of Christ, there is nothing like the Bible to produce growth in your life. But they make the statement that it isn't just spending time in the Bible that is critical, it is reflecting on the meaning of it for one's life. That's what's critical. And that is what the psalmist did. He meditated on God's Word. He had a reflective approach to God's Word.

And so if that is a critical approach for us, I want to spend the remainder of our time thinking about how to grow in our reflection on Scripture. I want to mention a few things that you can do to be more reflective in your approach to Scripture.

First, if you are going to reflect on God's Word, you need to have something on which to reflect. **There needs to be regular intake of God's Word.** Let me encourage you to commit to this in this new year however that can happen for you. It might be a commitment rise a bit earlier in the morning to read God's Word or to read before bed. It might mean listening to it on CDs as you drive to work.

Second, **don't walk away from time in God's Word without responding.** Whether you have just spent time reading God's Word or hearing a sermon on a Sunday morning make it your regular practice to respond in some way.

Your response might be to **pray** about what you just read or heard. You might ask God to show you what that passage means for your life. You might be led to confess something.

Part of this prayerful response is not just talking to God, but also **listening.** You can take time to simply be still and listen for God's Spirit to speak to you after you've read or heard His Word. This can be so hard for us. I know that so often after I've read, I often feel the urge to get up and get going with my day. But if we do that we might miss the quite whisper of God's Spirit. And in missing that whisper we miss what helps us orient our lives around the Word.

Another way to respond is through **journaling.** This isn't for everyone, but many people find it helpful. After reading a portion of Scripture, if you will take some time to write

about what you read or what you sensed God saying to you or to write out a prayer, you are being reflective in a way that will help you move from knowledge to obedience. However it works best for you, learn to not walk away from a time in the Word without responding in some way.

Third, another way to be more reflective is to **memorize portions of Scripture**. You can't help but be reflective if you are committing portions of Scripture to memory. When you memorize a portion of Scripture you can take it with you all day long and think about it. It doesn't really matter how long the passage of Scripture is. There have been times where I've committed whole chapters to memory and found that helpful. I might be out for a run and find myself meditating on the chapter. That is being reflective. But it can also be really short portions of God's Word. On Friday I was reading Luke 12 and the parable about the rich land owner who was building bigger and bigger barns saying eat, drink and be merry. And in response God said, "You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared. So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." Well, that phrase, "rich toward God" was the portion I committed to memory and I took that with me throughout the day and thought about it.

Finally, I want to mention one last way to be more reflective in your approach to Scripture. This suggestion is a way to be more reflective about the sermon that you hear on Sunday. I would encourage you to **join a sermon-based Life Group**. A sermon-based group is one in which the content of the group is the sermon that was preached the previous Sunday. Each week application-oriented study guides are developed based on the sermon and that is what is discussed in these groups. It can be a very helpful way to reflect on and apply what was heard on Sunday morning.

Well, I started this morning by sharing about the *31 Day Experiment* that was so beneficial to me. As we wrap up, I'd like to come back to that idea with an encouragement for you as you begin this New Year. If you are one who really hasn't make it part of your practice to read and reflect on God's Word let me challenge you to take the next 31 days and read it and reflect on it and just see what God does in your life. You don't have to make it a big deal. Pick a book of the Bible to read - maybe one of the Gospels or Ephesians or Philippians - and spend 10-15 minutes reading every day. When you are done reflect on it.

For those of you who tend to be fairly regular in reading God's Word, let me encourage you to make your 31 day experiment one of never walking away from a time in God's Word without responding in some way. Reflect on it. Pray about it. Journal. Memorize. Whatever you do, respond each time you read or hear God's Word and just see what God's Word might do in your life.