

Experiencing God through His Word

Psalm 119

I hope you were with us last Sunday when Bob Cochran shared about the ministry that he and Susan have had the past 10-12 years in Indonesia with Wycliffe Bible Translators. We saw videos and heard stories of the unbridled joy that various people groups experience when they can hear the Word of God in their own language or when they understand for the first time a basic panorama or drama of Scripture. They instinctively recognize that they have been given a very precious gift that can transform their hearts and minds, their relationships, and their entire communities.

As I listened to Bob last week I couldn't help but think of the contrast between their experience and the common experience here in America. Whereas many of the people Bob described have only snippets of Scripture in their own language, we are "swimming" in Bibles. The other day I decided to count up how many Bibles I have. Brenda and I had 31 Bibles at home, and I had 8 more in my office. I have about 10 or 12 New Testaments. On top of that I have 60 English translations on the YouVersion Bible app (which is free). We've got churches that teach the Word, podcasts that teach the Word, Bible studies and life groups, etc. We are swimming in Bibles, but it's relatively rare to see people - even church people - who view Scripture as so precious a gift that they celebrate it. . . and delight in it.

We as a church have a high view of Scripture. We understand that the Word of God is living and active - able to penetrate the deepest part of our souls, that the Word is without error in everything that it affirms, that all Scripture is inspired by God - that it is "God-breathed", and that the grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord stands forever. This "high view" of Scripture comes from the Bible itself: Isaiah and Jesus and Paul and others spoke of the Word of God in these ways.

We also understand that it is possible to have a high **view** of Scripture and a low **experience** of Scripture - to have an exalted understanding of what the Word is and can do and yet experience very little of its power. The Pharisees in Jesus' day should be a warning to us in this regard. They were Bible experts. They studied and memorized the Hebrew Scriptures. But they completely missed God in the process. When He showed up in the flesh in Jesus Christ they thought He was blasphemous and wanted Him killed.

This morning I want to discuss how we can put ourselves in a position to have **a deep experience of God through His Word**. We are going to consider three themes found in Psalm 119, which is the longest chapter in the Bible. Its 176 verses; 22 stanzas corresponding to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet; each stanza has 8 verses. In each stanza, the first word in each line begins with the same Hebrew letter. So, for example, the first word in each of verses 1-8 each begin with *aleph*. The psalmist uses at least nine different terms to describe God's truth; he speaks of God's *law*, *testimonies*, *precepts*, *statutes*, *commands*, *judgments*, *path*, *word*, and *way*. These various terms signify different functions and emphases of God's truth. The psalmist had

so saturated his mind with God's truth that he was able to see these distinctions and speak about God's truth with such precision and insight.

My challenge to you today is to make it your ambition to experience God's word as the psalmist did. Let's notice three things that are essential if we want to experience God deeply through His Word.

First, Psalm 119 illustrates that ***a deep experience of God through His Word involves delight***. When you delight in something you think about it all the time, and you talk about it whenever you get the chance. It's never far from your mind or your lips. I get this way about woodworking sometimes; you might be this way about sports or traveling or recipes or children.

One thing that strikes us immediately when we read through Psalm 119 is how the psalmist took such great delight in God's truth – and he expressed that back to God. This delight is advocated in Psalm 1. "1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! 2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night." Notice some of the verses in which this delight is recorded:

12 Blessed are You, O LORD;
Teach me Your statutes.
13 With my lips I have told of
All the ordinances of Your mouth.
14 I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,
As much as in all riches.
15 I will meditate on Your precepts
And regard Your ways.
16 I shall delight in Your statutes;
I shall not forget Your word.

A "statute" is a truth that is fixed, permanent. The psalmist took delight in the things of God that never change. This world is an uncertain place; we really have no idea what tomorrow will bring - whether great suffering or great pleasure. This is why the psalmist took great delight in God's statutes; because they revealed the things that never changed, they brought stability to his life.

This means, among other things, that we don't have to live our lives by trial-and-error: I think I'll try following this crowd or this philosophy of life or this lifestyle. There is no shortage of options, but it's a brutal way to live your life. If you've ever lived this way, you know that this is true. Jesus said that there is a "broad path that leads to destruction." That's why He offered the "narrow path that leads to life." That is what the Psalmist found in God's word; and that is why he delighted in it.

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

Here the psalmist speaks of God's "testimonies"; the Scriptures "testify" or "bear witness" to how we should live our lives. He understood his need for wise counselors, and he found such counselors in God's Word. Because of that, God's testimonies were his delight.

Verse 35 is instructive for us.

35 Make me walk in the path of Your commandments,
For I delight in it.

This verse illustrates that ***delight leads to obedience***. Because he delighted in God's commandments, he had a burning desire to be obedient. The same is true for us; if we delight in the Word we will have a desire to be obedient. By contrast, if we think that God's commandments are burdensome or irrelevant, we will have very little resolve to be obedient; we will find ourselves rationalizing our sin in a hundred different ways. But when we delight in God's commands/ways/testimonies/precepts, we are motivated to obey. ***Delight leads to obedience***.

I'm not suggesting that you do something unnatural here or that you express a delight in God's Word that is not yours. I am only urging you to express the deepest passion of your soul. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are able to say with the Apostle Paul in Romans 7, "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man." Even though Paul's flesh was still very much alive, in the deepest part of his being he took great delight in the law of God – the instructions laid down in God's Word. This love for and delight in God's word is one of the surest signs that a person has been born again, that a person is a new creature in Jesus Christ. God gives us a love for and an appetite for His Word when He brings us into His family.

This was certainly my own experience when I came to Christ. And I've known many people who have a passion for God through His Word. When I was in seminary I had a Japanese friend named Mako. During one semester break I remember asking him what he'd been doing. I expected him to say, "We're going into Chicago. . ." or "I've been sleeping late and watching movies. . ." But he said, "I have been reading the Scriptures many hours a day; my wife is trying to get me to read less so I can spend time with her and our son. . .but it's so fascinating!" He might have been a little out of balance, but he's always been a living example to me of someone who delights in God's word.

Second, Psalm 119 illustrates that ***a deep experience of God through His Word involves the intention to meditate and obey***.

It is really striking the way the author of Psalm 119 declares what he intends to do with God's statutes, commands, testimonies, law, etc. He declares very boldly that he intends to meditate and obey. As we go through a few examples, I want us to examine our own hearts to see whether we have this type of resolve or not.

11 Your word I have treasured in my heart,
That I may not sin against You.

Do you see how the psalmist declares his intentions there? He says, “God, Your word is so valuable that I am keeping it as a precious treasure in my heart. And I’m doing this because I want to avoid sinning against You.” His intention was to “not sin.” His strategy was to treasure up God’s Word in his heart. That meant mulling it over and over, pondering what God had said.

Look at verses 15 and 16.

15 I will meditate on Your precepts
And regard Your ways.
16 I shall delight in Your statutes;
I shall not forget Your word.

Again, we see that the psalmist was very resolved to meditate on God’s precepts. He declares, “I will meditate. . . delight in Your statutes; I shall not forget Your word.” I suspect that most of us have a much more cautious, “wait and see” attitude toward God’s Word. “If I find the time I might meditate on Your precepts and regard Your ways. Depending upon how I feel I may or may not delight in Your statutes; and God, only You know whether or not I will forget Your word.” We tend to think that it’s presumptuous to declare our intentions spiritually. But perhaps we’re just playing it safe because we don’t really **intend** to meditate on God’s Word and obey it. As we’ll see in the third point, the psalmist wasn’t relying on his own strength to carry out his intentions; over and over he pleads for God to empower him. But his will was firmly engaged; he had purposed in his heart to meditate on and obey God’s truth.

The term translated “meditate” has a variety of different connotations. It can mean to murmur or mutter something over and over. That’s what we do when we meditate: we murmur to ourselves (even out loud) a verse or phrase of Scripture. “Be still and know that I am God. . . . be still . . . be still . . . be still . . .” John Ortburg says that if you can worry, you can meditate; it’s the same process of mulling something over and over in your mind.

In Isaiah 31 the term “meditate” is used of a lion “growling over” its prey. The lion is savoring a goat or a sheep it has killed. A lion meditates on a goat by chewing and swallowing it. This is a picture of how we should approach the Scriptures. We settle in and slowly, deliberately assimilate the Scriptures in the depths of our being. Instead of gulping it down and getting on to the next thing, we growl over the Scriptures. We mull it over in our minds until the “word of Christ richly dwells within us.” This doesn’t happen by accident; we have to **intend** to meditate on Scripture.

Look as well at verses 105 and 106

105 Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.
106 I have sworn and I will confirm it,
That I will keep Your righteous ordinances.

The psalmist is declaring to God his intention to obey what God has shown Him. Again, this may sound presumptuous until we consider the converse: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. And, Lord, I may or may not take Your advice." Unless we delight in God's Word and set our hearts to obey, that's basically what we're saying. Verse 112 says this:

112 I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes
Forever, *even* to the end.

This is bold way of praying that raises the question, "Do I really intend to obey what I find in Scripture? Or am I leaving open the possibility that I will be a 'hearer only' and not a 'doer'?" I can't answer that question for you; only you can answer that question. Following the Psalmist's example, consider the possibility of making it your intention to meditate on God's Word daily and then to obey what you learn.

Third, Psalm 119 illustrates that ***a deep experience of God through His Word involves crying out to Him in faith***.

Throughout Psalm 119 the psalmist pleads with God to enable him to understand and obey the truth. He knows that unless God empowers him, his intentions will be nothing more than wishful thinking. The psalmist understood that there's nothing incompatible between our efforts and God's help/grace. In other words, he was very diligent in seeking God through the Scriptures and yet he knew that **God** had to teach him and make him obedient. Verses 9 and 10 are a good expression of this balance.

9 How can a young man keep his way pure?
By keeping *it* according to Your word.
10 With all my heart I have sought You;
Do not let me wander from Your commandments.

The psalmist can say in the same breath, "With all my heart I have sought You," and "Do not let me wander from Your commandments." He knew that all of his seeking would be in vain if God didn't empower him to obey. The same was true of the very learning process itself; if God didn't teach him, he wouldn't learn.

64 The earth is full of Your lovingkindness, O LORD;
Teach me Your statutes.

While he was seeking God through meditating on His truth, the psalmist cries out to God to teach him. Verse 73 reads:

73 Your hands made me and fashioned me;
Give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments.

In verse 102 the psalmist acknowledges that God has been his teacher all along.

102 I have not turned aside from Your ordinances,
For You Yourself have taught me.

Verse 107 reflects a more desperate situation in which the psalmist pleads with God to use His Word in his life.

107 I am exceedingly afflicted;
Revive me, O LORD, according to Your word.

Many times that should be our plea as well. We delight in God's Word and we purpose in our hearts to obey it. But in the final analysis, it is God who ministers the Word to us. Our effort is necessary, but it is not sufficient by itself; if God doesn't empower us, we won't learn and we won't obey. And so we plead with God, "Revive me, O LORD, according to Your word."

We can pray this with confidence because God has already committed Himself to writing His law on our hearts. In Jeremiah 31:33, God committed Himself to this:

33 "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

The contrast there is between the law of God being something external (written on tablets of stone) and God's law being something internal (written on our hearts). This happens as we do what the author of Psalm 119 has been describing – delighting in and meditating upon the Word, and trusting God to empower us. So, when we pray for God to teach us and empower us to obey, we can have great confidence because we are praying according to God's revealed will.

Conclusion. In her book *The Madonna's of Leningrad*, Debra Dean tells about the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad, Russia during World War II. [Madonna - "my lady" in Italian; refers to a painting of Jesus' mother, Mary.] As the Nazis laid siege to Leningrad, the Hermitage museum staff packed up and evacuated 1.1 million pieces of art in case the museum was bombed. This was a labor of love by the museum staff who actually lived in the basement of the Hermitage during the siege. Most of the paintings were removed from their frames and rolled up in paper and packed in crates to be evacuated. Significantly, the empty picture frames were hung back on the walls as a pledge that the paintings would one day return.

Accounts tell us that during the war Russian soldiers who came back to Leningrad from the front would sometimes come to the Hermitage. Some of the tour guides knew the paintings so well that they could give tours with just the empty picture frames hanging on the wall. The paintings were so etched into their minds and hearts that they would point out features and colors and tell the story of the paintings in moving detail. These descriptions flowed from such a deep place that "visitors could almost see them" (appendix of *Madonnas of Leningrad* by Debra Dean). Sometimes visitors silently wept because they were so moved by the descriptions of the paintings.

What if the teachings of Jesus captivated our hearts and minds in similar fashion? What if the teachings of Jesus were like paintings etched into our memories to the point where they captivated the deep places of our hearts, moving us to action? That is the vision of Psalm 119 and the vision of Jesus. Jesus told His disciples that His word should “abide” in them – it should be right at home in their minds/hearts. By God’s Spirit the teachings of Christ can captivate us to the point where they inform what we think, say, and do.