

## May 12, 2021 | Wednesday Night Live | Psalm 119: Learning the Letters of Scripture

### Week 2 | Psalm 119:1-8 | Aleph

Last week, we kicked off a new series through Psalm 119.

- The largest chapter in the bible is about the importance of the bible. The best way to look at Psalm 119 is to view it like a kaleidoscope with varying colors and multifaceted shards of glass, all unique within their stanzas, but yet all have been illuminated by the light of God's word.<sup>1</sup> That was why the big takeaway for not only last week's message but the entire psalm was that "Learning the letters of Scripture teaches us how to live."
- It's an acrostic poem using the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet as its structure. This style is not unique in the scriptures as other passages follow suit (cf. Psalm 9+10; 111; 112; Pro. 31). However, unlike its parallels which use 1 verse per letter, Psalm 119 uses 8 verses per letter.
- Because the psalm is divided by the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, essentially, there are 22 different psalms contained in this one psalm as each stanza of eight verses is self-contained.<sup>2</sup> Hence why we will be studying this chapter for the next 22 weeks.
- Why an acrostic? They were not only a memory devise meant to aid in recitations and retention;<sup>3</sup> it was also a symbolic way of stating that the Scriptures have everything from A to Z—all that we need for life and godliness is contained in the Good Book.
- Aside from its central theme, God's word, there are three other themes woven throughout the psalm: the psalmist lives in an alien culture and, because of this, he is discouraged and so is looking for a pathway through this life that honors God. This means the entire Psalm is a prayer from the writer to God, a one-on-one conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, Leslie C., *Psalm 101-150*, The World Biblical Commentary, Volume 21, (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), p. 181.

<sup>2</sup> Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150, The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 3:377.

<sup>3</sup> DeClaissé-Walford (2014), p. 870.

Today, we begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph. <Insert Picture>

**READ:** Psalm 119:1-8 (ESV)

## Aleph

<sup>1</sup> Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord!

<sup>2</sup> Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart,

<sup>3</sup> who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways!

<sup>4</sup> You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.

<sup>5</sup> Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!

<sup>6</sup> Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

<sup>7</sup> I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous rules.

<sup>8</sup> I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me!

Of the eight terms for Scripture, “law” (tôrâ) is used the most: 25xs. It is also the first of the eight terms used in the very first verse. This makes “law,” by far and away, the most important term in the whole of Psalm 119.<sup>4</sup>

What does “law” mean?

“Law” can refer to legislation, as in the rules contained in Leviticus and Deuteronomy; but, its more nuanced meaning is that of the instructions a loving father would give to his child (cf. Proverbs).<sup>5</sup> This contrasts with our own use of “law,” which only has a judicial feel. Scripturally, when we talk about the “law,” we are not only referring to the ten commandments, but we're also referring to the first five books of the OT; all of

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<sup>4</sup> Allen (2002), p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> Wilcock (2001), p. 194-195.

which is a historical narrative telling the story of Israel's redemption and not just some long list of regulations. The point is that "law" has both narrative and regulatory aspects to it, but, of the two, it's heavy on the account side and light on the requirement side. Hence, "law" is guidance told via a story with a fair bit of rules sprinkled throughout. One commentator even thought it best to translate this term as "guidebook" throughout Psalm 119.<sup>6</sup> This would make God our Guide as if he was leading through a treacherous and dangerous way.

This first stanza can be divided into two halves: the first, verses 1-4, are general statements about God's word, and the second, verse 5-8, the psalmist specifically identifies himself with those statements. Thus, essentially, the psalmist says, "Here are the principles laid out before me, and here is my participation."

What are the principles the psalmist is trying to instill?

- Vs. 1      The one who walks in God's law will have integrity ("a blameless way") which then cultivates good fortune ("blessed") in life.
  
- Vs. 2-3    The one who holds tight to God's testimonies—that is, to seek out God with one's entire being ("whole heart")—is to walk in His footsteps ("his ways"), avoiding the missteps ("does no wrong") and will find themselves, generally speaking, blessed.
  
- Vs. 4      God's precepts are not suggestions but commandments; as such, they are meant to be upheld with the utmost diligence. There are no half-measures when following God's way.

What unifies these three principles is how the person who has ***internalized*** God's Word in their hearts will ***externalize*** it with their footsteps. They will not walk in many different ways, but they will only keep step in God's way. They will not seek their own happiness apart from God's law, but they will experience true joy as they walk in His ways. This true happiness, what the

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<sup>6</sup> Allen (2002), p. 184.

bible calls "blessedness," is not found in the multitudes of new beginnings "but of keeping on the way."<sup>7</sup>

It should not go unnoticed that the first word in the largest chapter of the bible is, in fact, the word "blessed." God's primary intention in giving us his word is not to *ruin* our fun but to fulfill our joy. "He is a God who speaks, and our blessedness is bound up with our attitude to what he says."<sup>8</sup> As such, when we try to imitate, mimic, and echo the footsteps of God, we discover what true happiness truly is. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it best when he said, "God's ways are the ways which he himself has gone and which we are now to go with him."<sup>9</sup> And we are a happy people when we walk in the footsteps of our God.

What's more, the term "blessed" recalls the opening line of the entire book of Psalms itself, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law, he meditates day and night."<sup>10</sup> Delightedness and blessedness are the by-products of God's law. The one who deviates from God's word to go along the pathway of the ungodly, sinner, and scornful will forfeit contentment and enjoyment.

Moving on from these static principles, the Psalmist reflects on his own firm intentions.

- Vs. 5        This aspiration acknowledges that knowing God's word and keeping God's word is not the same. One minute, we are steadfast and firm; another minute, we are weak-kneed and cowardice. The Psalmist's desire, at least at the time of this writing, is resolved.
  
- Vs. 6        Eyes that are "fixed" on God's commandments will not see "shame" but celebration, not humiliation but honor. But the eyes of those who wander from God's word will not see themselves honored in a community but only shamed in that community.

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<sup>7</sup>        Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150, The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 3:382.

<sup>8</sup>        Wilcock, Michael, *The Message of Psalms 73-150*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, Ill; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2001), p. 194.

<sup>9</sup>        Goldingay (2008), 3:382-383.

<sup>10</sup>        DeClaissé-Walford, Nancy, Rolf A. Jacobson, Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2014), p. 882.

- Vs. 7      Nothing fuels worship quite like God's own Word. Unshackled by the chains of sin, the soul can soar as it sings the "praises" of Scripture. The heart that has experienced the enlightening power of God's Word cannot help but give testimony. But, notice, we do not do this instinctively; worship is a natural response after we've learned God's rules. We cannot worship as God intended without divine revelation on how to do so.
- Vs. 8      All good bible studies ought to end with a commitment. The Psalmist knows Scripture reading is a cooperative exercise. People of the Book are not mere learners of the Word, but doers also (cf. Ja. 1:22-25). Essentially, this makes us the mimics of God. Whereas in vs. 5, the Psalmist's desire was nothing more than a wishful aspiration, here it's become a tangible promise. He has learned and now will do. And because of his commitment to God, he requests that God not abandon him. The implied understanding of one who holds tightly to God's word is that, as they draw close to God, God will draw near to them (cf. Ja. 4:8). The converse is true as well, that, just as one abandons God's word, so too will they be abandoned by God. And what is the second death, if not separation from God? But this is not our Psalmist. No. Because the Psalmist has wholly followed God's word, he knows he will not be utterly forsaken (cf. Dan. 9).<sup>11</sup>

Now, typically, I'd sum up what we've learned today into a short, easy-to-remember statement. However, since each verse stands on its own and deals with varying topics, that is an impossibility. So, instead, I'm going to ask, "What's your takeaway?" Out of all the things we talked about tonight, what resonated with you the most?

For me, it was good to be reminded that praise and worship are the natural responses of Bible study. If reading the scriptures doesn't make you want to sing, you've probably been doing it wrong.

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<sup>11</sup> Longman, Tremper, III, & David E. Garland, *Psalms*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Volume 5, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Academic, 2008), p. 861.

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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TITLE: Aleph

TEXT: Psalm 119:1-8

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: