


May 26, 2021 | Wednesday Night Live | Psalm 119: Learning the Letters of Scripture

Week 4 | Psalm 119:17-24 | Gimel

Today, we move on to the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Gimel.  Now, as we've said every week, 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. These themes come to the forefront of this stanza, and it is fleshed out in two ways: the first (vs. 17-20) speaks about the Psalmist foreign identity, and the second (vs. 21-24) speaks about the tension that arises when a sojourner of heaven walks the earth.

READ: Psalm 119:17-24 (ESV)

Gimel

¹⁷ Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word.

¹⁸ Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.

¹⁹ I am a sojourner on the earth; hide not your commandments from me!

²⁰ My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times.

²¹ You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from your commandments.

²² Take away from me scorn and contempt, for I have kept your testimonies.

²³ Even though princes sit plotting against me, your servant will meditate on your statutes.

²⁴ Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors.

The next term that refers to Scripture is "commandments." "Commandment" (mitsvâh) is used only 22x's in Psalm 119.¹

What does the term "commandments" mean?

The term "commandments" refers to the written ordinances of God. These would be the clear-cut rules that God has revealed, i.e., the "code of law." This would be a charge given by a king to his subjects. They are absolute and irrevocable. But with those commands come blessings and promises.

¹ Longman, Tremper, III, & David E. Garland, *Psalms*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Volume 5, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2008), p. 859.

What are the principles the Psalmist is trying to instill?

- Vs. 17 God's interaction in our world—His sovereignty—is not something we'd ever want to go without. Hence, the Psalmist ("your servant") wants God to engage in every aspect of his life ("deal bountifully"). God's interaction in our lives enables us to "live and keep" His "word." This implies that apart from the Lord's agency, we will not live nor obey God's word.
- Vs. 18 The "law" of God contains extraordinary ("wonderous") things which spark our imagination and so fuels our dedication. But our mind's "eye" is blinded and in need of someone to "open" them. Illuminating God's word is God's work. Interestingly, the Psalmist uses the term "tôrâ," which referred to the first five books of the OT. Often referred to by its Greek moniker the "Pentateuch," this collection of books wasn't only a record of what God had done for Israel in the past but a motivation for what they must do in the future.² Many "wonderous" things are recorded from Genesis to Deuteronomy and even more from Deuteronomy to Revelation. When we remember what God did for us yesterday, we will not be so easily discouraged when God seems absent today. But the greatest wonder of all isn't God's personal interaction with us, however important that may be; it is God's "law" itself. Scriptures are more precious than even our own experiences.
- Vs. 19 The Psalmist is not only a "servant" (vs. 17) but a "sojourner." The idea of a pilgrim may invoke fond memories of Thanksgiving meals for a Western reader, but to be a wanderer in the East meant someone was living in a foreign land without rights (cf. Lev. 25:23).³ They were aliens with no family or friends to support them. Does this mean our Psalmist was a foreigner living in Israel? No. It meant that he didn't feel at home even in his own country. He was a stranger living amongst familiar faces.⁴ Why? It's possible he was surrounded by Israelites who were not living as Israelites. Hence, he would not see God's "commandments" in his day-to-day living and so would

² Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150, The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 3:389.

³ Allen, Leslie C., *Psalms 101-150*, The World Biblical Commentary, Volume 21, (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), p. 186.

⁴ Wilcock, Michael, *The Message of Psalms 73-150*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, Ill; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2001), p. 196.

request that God not “hide” them from him. It is all too easy to backslide when surrounded by backsliders.

Vs. 20 The exclaims that his study of God’s “rules” is an obsession (“consumed”). He so “longs” to know and understand the Scriptures that it is all he can ever think about (“all times”). It would appear that one can never be too preoccupied with God’s word.

Vs. 21 God's guiding principles for life ("commandments") are like a pathway. "Wander" off the path, and all that awaits you is an "accursed" life. This is the only instance of *aw-rar'* (“cursed”) in all of Psalms.⁵ The word is supposed to jump at us off the page and remind us of Gen. 3, where Adam, Eve, and the Serpent were all cursed. It is a sobering reminder about the supremacy of God's commands and the consequences of disobedience. God “rebukes the insolent,” what is described as the “divine shout of rage.”⁶ Willful defiance cannot stand in the presence of God; thus, straying always leads to disaster. But even from Gen 3, we see that the scolding of God is not total annihilation. Even the unruly child is loved through the tender correction of his father (cf. Pro. 3:12). While never pleasant, the chastening of the Lord is as much evidence of God’s affection for us as is His blessing. However, hopefully, one's will breaks down before one’s life.

Vs. 22 Often, those who follow God's law will attract "scorn and contempt." But that pales in comparison to the "scorn and contempt" heaped upon those who defy God's "testimonies," as referenced in the previous verse. The Psalmist knows this, and so here in this verse, he pleads that God keeps away *true* “scorn and contempt” away from him because he has “kept” God’s word. Though men may dishonor him in this life, the Psalmist will receive the honor in the next life because he has obeyed the voice of his God. That this is the reality that all faithful followers of God have experienced throughout the centuries is of little doubt. Hard enough to be a foreigner in a distant and unfamiliar land; harder still to be like a foreigner in one's own hometown. Many an immigrant has known the ridicule born from their lack of knowledge of local customs. But full-on “scorn and contempt” is reserved for the person who knows the ways of his people well but still

⁵ Goldingay (2008), 3:391.

⁶ Allen (2002), p. 186.

chooses a different path. This person is without excuse and so attracts the disdain of his peers.

Vs. 23 It should come as no surprise to the student of God's word that man's law can be marshaled against the people of God (cf. 1 Ki. 21; Dan. 3; 4; Ezra 9; Neh. 9; Esth. 3; Mat. 14; 27). Even "princes" atop their ivory castles will set their sights on destroying those who hold to God's word. But while they may speak evil of the Psalmist, his response is to murmur ("mediate") on God's "statues" (cf. Ac. 4:20). When wicked men speak ill of the follower of God, the follower of God mumbles the words of God to himself. When the disciple is vilified in the eyes of the public, may they whisper Scripture over and over again.

Vs. 24 This verse may well forge a link with the previous verse. Rather than utilize a gang of attorneys to defend himself, the Psalmist says that his "counselors" are the "testimonies" of the Lord. These principles bring his heart joy in an otherwise joyless situation. And where the evil "princes" conspire together in verse 23, the Psalmist takes council with the word of God. These advisers are not some pay-by-the-hour-lawyers, but they are his dearest and best friends. They not only direct his footsteps but they "delight" his downtrodden emotions. No better source of encouragement and advice can be found than in God's word.

"What's your takeaway?" Out of all the things we talked about tonight, what resonated with you the most?

For me, feeling like a stranger in your own hometown is all too real. The only comfort I had growing up in a school where I was bullied and made fun of for my belief was God. Church, especially Wednesday nights, became an oasis from the world. And if I ever lacked the camaraderie of friends, I learned quickly to open up the bible and start reading.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: