

## July 21, 2021 | Wednesday Night Live | Psalm 119: Learning the Letters of Scripture

Week 10 | Psalm 119:65-72 | Teth

Today, we move on to the ninth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Teth. <Insert Picture>

Generally speaking, there are two Hebrew words for the word “good.” And they are *tūv* and *tōv*. Considering that these two words also begin with the Hebrew letter Teth, it is not surprising we find that the term “good” appears six times in the following eight verses.<sup>1</sup> David once opined that “goodness” (*tōv*) will follow him for the rest of his days because he’s made the Lord his shepherd (Ps. 23:6). The Psalmist will make similar claims in this stanza. Apparently, living the “good” life is contingent upon who one chooses to follow.

**READ:** Psalm 119:65-72 (ESV)

### Teth

<sup>65</sup> You have dealt well with your servant, O Lord, according to your word.

<sup>66</sup> Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments.

<sup>67</sup> Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.

<sup>68</sup> You are good and do good; teach me your statutes.

<sup>69</sup> The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts;

<sup>70</sup> their heart is unfeeling like fat, but I delight in your law.

<sup>71</sup> It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.

<sup>72</sup> The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

What are the principles the Psalmist is trying to instill in this ninth stanza?

Vs. 65      Few things are more aggravating than when someone says they will do one thing but end up doing something else. False deities throughout the centuries were like this. They’d forbid things but then turn around and break those very commands when it suited them. Or worse, they’d promise something but fail to uphold their vows. A fleeting glance at Greek lore reveals that its pantheon was as capricious and narcissistic as any human. For example, Cronus, the father of Zeus, ate his own children because he

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<sup>1</sup> DeClaisé-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. 883.

feared they'd overpower him. Now, imagine for a moment that Yahweh was such a being. One who changes His mind fails to follow through with something He has said or only acts to suit His own needs to the detriment of His own creation. Would that sort of deity garner even the slightest bit of confidence? No. But is our God anything like the old gods? No. Is Jehovah anything like human beings? No. No one is like our God (cf. Ex. 8:10). What God says He will do, He will do. For the Psalmist, this means that the Lord's dealings with His creation are always profitable and good ("dealt well"). And while God always works out His own will for His own purposes, that resolution is always beneficial for His "servants." We should not be surprised that bringing our lives in "accordance" with God's "word" makes for a pretty good life.

Vs. 66      The Psalmist points out a crucial distinction that is often overlooked: data and discernment are not the same. Meaning, we cannot assume that we know how to wield knowledge just because we know something. It is only when experience and intelligence ("knowledge") go hand-in-hand that a person acquires good sense. This is readily seen in how a particular person may be uneducated in an official sense yet will often possess a keen intellect if they've lived long enough. Typically, with age, a person becomes savvier and more levelheaded. We see this in the Psalmist's use of the Hebrew word *ṭa'am* ("judgement"), which, quite literally means, "taste" (cf. Job 34:3; Heb. 5:14).<sup>2</sup> Just as experience makes a better chef so too does experience make a better person. Live long enough, and a person will have a better taste of the world. They will know by instinct what the right course of action is simply because they've lived long enough to understand how the world works. This is especially the case when they start from the *right* place and build a life on the proper foundation. While no doubt old enough to know how the world works, the Psalmist does not rely on his experience alone to guide him. In fact, his belief is not in his own abilities at all; instead, he "believes" in the Lord's "commandments." That is his starting point. That is the lens through which he sees the world. And the result isn't terrible judgment and knowledge, but "good" judgment and expertise. Our

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<sup>2</sup> Kidner, Derek, *Psalm 73-150*, The Kidner Classic Commentaries, (Downers Grove, ILL: Inter-Varsity Press Academic, Reprint, 2008), p.461.

sojourner has a **good** head on his shoulders because he has a **good** set of principles guiding his footsteps.

- Vs. 67 The writer of Proverbs observed that the way of a sinner is hard (Pro. 13:15). Here, the Psalmist acknowledges his own shortcomings. He knows he is far from perfect. When he walked the road of disobedience and veered away from God's commands, the result was a life of hardship. Apparently, those actions took on a veritable life of their own and began "afflicting" him while he was "astray." But he learned from those mistakes. He now "keeps" God's "word." The implication is that in holding on to those Scriptures, he does not repeat past mistakes. He has learned to avoid the same pitfalls which caused him to fall in the first place. To err is human; this is true. But to err repeatedly in the same way over and over again is lunacy. The Psalmist may fall, but he will not fail the same way twice.
- Vs. 68 Yahweh's good deeds flow from Yahweh's good essence. Like a good tree that bears good fruit, God produces good because He *is* good. In fact, because of the fall, God is the only truly good thing in our world. Everything He does has been for the good of all. He even makes the sunrise each day, and He makes the rain fall on all regardless of their spiritual state (cf. Mat. 5:44-45). Who better to learn good "statues" from than Jehovah?
- Vs. 69 Defamation is spreading misinformation about a person's character that results in public scorn, contempt, or ridicule. For instance, in 2006, actress Kate Hudson sued and won a defamation case against *The National Enquirer* because they falsely claimed she had an eating disorder.<sup>3</sup> Or, in 2017, Sarah Palin filed a suit against *The New York Times* who printed a piece that tried to link her with the 2011 Tucson shooting of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz.<sup>4</sup> Slander is not a new tactic. Even the Psalmist was the target of a "smear" campaign that sought to spread "lies" about him. The Hebrew word used for "smear" (tâphal) means literally to plaster over something.<sup>5</sup> This vividly illustrates how someone may conceal the ethical aspects of the person to

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<sup>3</sup> L.A. Times Archives, "Libel settlement for Kate Hudson," July 21, 2006, *The Los Angeles Times*, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2006-jul-21-et-quick21.5-story.html>, [accessed, July 21, 2021].

<sup>4</sup> Gerstein, Josh, "Judge orders jury trial in Palin libel suit against the New York times," August 8, 2020, *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/29/sarah-palin-libel-new-york-times-404810>, [accessed, July 21, 2021].

<sup>5</sup> Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150, The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 3:408.

present them to the public as vindictive and dishonest (cf. Job 13:4).<sup>6</sup> But even though public opinion of him had turned, our wanderer does not diverge from his focus. With his "whole heart," he focuses on the Lord's "precepts." Meaning, the Psalmist is far more concerned with how God sees him than how he is perceived by others. As Dr. Shoemaker would say, "Make God happy and it won't matter who you make angry."

Vs. 70 The Psalmist breaks from the norm and connects this verse with the previous one. He says that those who have sought to slander and smear his good name have minds ("hearts") that are encased in "fat." The Hebrew words envisage the idea of thickness. Which, if taken in the literal sense, would appear as if the Psalmist himself was engaging in slander. But our singer/songwriter would not stoop to such a level. Instead, the Psalmist means that those who are trying to defame him are unfeeling.<sup>7</sup> They have little to no consideration or feeling for the one they are trying to belittle. Oh, how easy it is for human beings to forget their own humanity when they seek to disparage another. But while the Psalmist's opponents are callous, he is overjoyed ("delighted") with God's word ("law"). Even if we risk being hurt, it is better to feel than to be numb and so become unsympathetic to those around us.

Vs. 71 Once again, the Psalmist seems to be breaking from his manner of writing self-contained verses and references the "affliction" of verse 67. There, he highlighted how wandering away from God's plan made his way hard. Here, he actually admits that the difficulty he experienced when he went astray was "good" (cf. Pro. 3:11-12; Heb. 12:11). How can he call trouble "good"? Because it was his weakness that drew him back to God. Hardship has a way of sending us back to God (cf. Lu. 15:11-32).<sup>8</sup> He tried it his way, and that way failed. Thus, he not only learned God's word in the academic sense but also has learned God's "statues" in the empiric sense. Metaphorically, the Psalmist has touched a lump of coal from a campfire even though he's been told it will burn him and has learned that, indeed, the coal burned him.

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<sup>6</sup> Allen, Leslie C., *Psalms 101-150*, The World Biblical Commentary, Volume 21, (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> Longman, Tremper, III, & David E. Garland, *Psalms*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Volume 5, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Academic, 2008), p. 872.

<sup>8</sup> Wilcock, Michael, *The Message of Psalms 73-150*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, Ill; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2001), p. 204.

Theory is now substantiated by evidence. Maybe now, he will simply take the Lord at his word and not try to test the bounds.

Vs. 72 Many would claim that winning the lottery is a good thing. But according to one study, most people who win the lottery will declare bankruptcy within three to five years.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Jack Whittaker says that he wished he had "torn the ticket up" instead of cash in that \$315 million ticket in 2002.<sup>10</sup> Here, the Psalmist admits that "thousands of gold and silvers pieces" are not as valuable as the "law." And not just any law, the "law of your [God's] mouth" which vividly illustrates that the written Scriptures were a literal recording of the voice of the Lord.<sup>11</sup> Money can only do so much, and what it can do is sorely limited. And of the many things it cannot do, probably the one thing we need to be reminded of most is that wealth does not equate to well-being. Some of the most affluent people who ever lived were also some of the most unhappiest people ever lived (cf. Ecc. 6:1-6). More dollar bills in the bank cannot give us a good life. Only the Scriptures can do that. Apparently, our sojourner took to heart when Wisdom told him, "Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her." (Prov. 8:10-11) Happy is the man who is rich in God's word.

"What's your takeaway?"

My takeaway this evening is this: in defaming another, I forget my humanity. It is scary how easy it is to mock and slander someone we do not really know. Whatever we perceive about their character is taken for a fact simply because we do not have a personal, one-on-one interaction to compare it to. When I do this, I reduce them to something less than what they are, image-bearers of God. And the few times where I've stopped myself from speaking ill about someone, it is because I've reminded myself that they are just as flawed as I am.

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<sup>9</sup> Hess, Abigail Johnson, "Here's why lottery winners go broke," August 25, 2017, *CNBC*, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/25/heres-why-lottery-winners-go-broke.html>, [accessed, July 21, 2021].

<sup>10</sup> Chan, Melissa, "Here's How Winning the Lottery Makes You Miserable," January 12, 2016, *Time*, <https://time.com/4176128/powerball-jackpot-lottery-winners/>, [accessed, July 21, 2021].

<sup>11</sup> Allen (2002), p. 188

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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TITLE: Teth

TEXT: Psalm 119:65-72

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: <https://docdro.id/zefINDJ>