

August 18, 2021 | Wednesday Night Live | Psalm 119: Learning the Letters of Scripture

Week 14 | Psalm 119:97-104 | Mem

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

The Psalmist compares the Scriptures to a variety of different things in this stanza. And in each case, God's word comes out on top. These contrasting elements effectively raise our evaluation of the Bible to such an extent that nothing will even come close to the market value of God's promises. As such, this entire stanza is a song of praise about the supremacy of God's word over all else, and it is the first stanza of its kind in Psalm 119.¹ Put simply, the words of the Psalmist here echo that of Proverbs, which says, "How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver." (Prov. 16:16)

READ: Psalm 119:97-104 (ESV)

⁹⁷ Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.

⁹⁸ Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me.

⁹⁹ I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.

¹⁰⁰ I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.

¹⁰¹ I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word.

¹⁰² I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me.

¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

¹⁰⁴ Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.

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

Vs. 97 As if we already didn't know this, the Psalmist emphatically declares his "love" for God's "law" (cf. vs. 47-48). The term our sojourner uses for love is the Hebrew word *ahavah*. In the OT, it is a versatile word referring to all different kinds of love.² For instance, Xerxes is said to have "loved" Esther, but, given his character and the context, that kind of love is better

¹ Wilcock, Michael, *The Message of Psalms 73-150*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, Ill; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2001), p. 207.

² Mackie, Tim, "Bible Studies: Love," July 20, 2017, *The Bible Project*, <https://bibleproject.com/church-at-home/week18-love/>, [accessed, August 18, 2021].

understood as lust (Esth. 2:17). *Ahavah* also shows up in the story of Abraham and Isaac, where it clearly refers to parental love (Gen. 22:2). It surfaces again when it is said that Elkanah "loved" his wife Hannah, thus indicating a marital love (1 Sam. 1:5). And, lastly, the word also appears in 1 Sam. 18, where Jonathan, Israel, and Judah all "loved" David, seemingly implying an admiration and/or respect for the man. However, out of all the references to *ahavah* in the OT, the one that is most relevant to Psalm 119:97 comes in Deuteronomy 6:5, where Moses commands the Jews to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." In a word, Moses wanted the Israelites to be obsessed with God. They were to engage their entire being (i.e., heart, soul, might) in the pursuit of God. Here, the Psalmist admits that this is precisely what he has done (cf. vs. 40). He loves not only God but God's law so much he thinks about it "all the day."³ Meaning, if you were to approach our sojourner on the side of the road, odds are pretty great that you'd hear him muttering ("meditation") some aspect of Scripture to himself.

Vs. 98 In 176 verses, this is the only reference to *kha-kham'*, here translated as "wiser." And, unsurprisingly, this word shows up most often in the Book of Proverbs (cf. Pro. 6:6; 8:33; 9:9, 12; 13:20; 19:20; 20:1; 21:11; 23:15, 19; 27:11; 30:24). The best example of this comes in Proverbs 9:9 where the writer says, "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning." The Psalmist has seen this truth played out in real time. Particularly, he has seen God's wisdom triumph over his "enemies." Whatever wisdom they have is not to be compared to the wisdom our sojourner processes because, at best, the enemies' wisdom is their own, whereas the Psalmist's wisdom is really God's wisdom. All the wealth of human intelligence is but a drop in the sea of God's knowledge. What's more, this divine insight is glued to the Psalmist ("ever with me") as he sojourns. They are like friends who stick closer than even a brother (cf. Pro. 18:24). These words of wisdom will never forsake our wanderer but will be his faithful companions throughout life's journeys.

³ Allen, Leslie C., *Psalm 101-150*, The World Biblical Commentary, Volume 21, (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), p. 190.

Once you've internalized God's word, those words will be with you for the long haul.

Vs. 99 Once again, in 176 verses, this is the only reference to *a-khal'*, here translated as "understanding." And, as with *kha-kham'*, *sa-khal'* shows up most often in the Book of Proverbs (cf. Pro. 1:3; 10:5, 19; 14:35; 15:24; 16:20, 23; 17:2, 8; 19:14; 21:11-12, 16). The Psalmist's point is that when someone is obsessed with God's "precepts," they have the potential to be even more discerning and judicious than one's own "teachers." This may imply that the Psalmist had teachers who were not as devoted to God's word as he was, and so, he would naturally be more knowledgeable than they were with the Scriptures. After all, the hubris of teachers is the propensity to think they have everything figured out and so fail to ponder ("meditation") on what they think they know. Or, rather than this being a pejorative about his instructors, it's an observation that even the best tutor is not to be compared with the Divine Tutor. An educator can only do so much. At some point, the pupil must take it upon themselves and learn from the Source itself. In doing so, they will have built on top of what has come before, and the result would be that they will have become "wiser" than their mentors. Either way, the Psalmist's point is that he has found a wealth of knowledge that transcends the human experience.⁴

Vs. 100 Unlike *sa-khal'* and *kha-kham'*, the Hebrew term *biyn*, here translated as "understand," is found throughout Psalm 119 (cf. vs. 27, 34, 73, 95, 104, etc.) But like *sa-khal'*, and *kha-kham'* before it, *biyn* shows up the most in the Book of Proverbs (cf. Pro. 1:2, 5, 6; 2:5, 9; 7:7; 8:5, 9-10; 10:13; 14:6, 8, 15, 33; 15:14; 16:21; 17:10, 24, 28; 18:15; 19:25; 20:24; 21:29; 23:1; 24:12; 28:2, 5, 7, 11; 29:7; 29:19). And, just as he did previously, the Psalmist is comparing the intelligence he gets from God's word to that of someone else's. In verse 98, it was his enemy's wisdom. Then, in verse 99, it was his instructor's understanding. And now, here, in verse 100, our sojourner is comparing the comprehension he gets from God's "precepts" to the insight one gets from the "aged." He's referring to the governing body of elders who would've made decisions for the community, such as settling disputes,

⁴ Longman, Tremper, III, & David E. Garland, *Psalms*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Volume 5, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Academic, 2008), p. 877.

witnessing transactions, and offering advice (cf. Deut. 21; Ruth 4; 1 Ki. 12).⁵ And, just as before, even with these honored members of society, there is no real contest. While age undoubtedly imparts a degree of wisdom, even wisdom that has been ruminating in the Scriptures over a lifetime still does not trump the Scriptures themselves. Especially if these seniors haven't "kept" God's word as the Psalmist has. But, either way, the wisdom of sages falls woefully short when compared to the Word that existed before the universe was formed. Or, to put it another way, the knowledge that Methuselah gleaned over 969 years does not rival the knowledge that the Ancient of Days possesses. Even Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, is nothing more than a toddler when set side by side the I AM who gave him that wisdom in the first place.

Vs. 101 To "keep" God's "word" requires that we leave some roads unexplored. The Psalmist sees that obedience to the Scriptures not only requires action but also self-restraint. And so, our sojourner will wander throughout this world but will make sure to resist the urge ("hold back") to venture down unvirtuous paths ("evil way"). He knows that God's commands are as much a not-doing as they are a doing. And a good approach keeps us in step with God, whereas a bad route takes us out of step with God. The wrong path is not simply the incorrect one but the morally depraved one. To walk the evil way is a mistake and sin.

Vs. 102 If not for the one-on-one instruction he received from God, the Psalmist would be lured away. But the Lord is a great teacher who has "taught" our wanderer to be sober and alert while he travels. Like a well-worn path in the wood, our Psalmist follows the trail God has left for him and does not venture off the beaten path and so "turn aside from [God's] rules." After all, those rules are his lifeline, and he knows that he would not survive long without them. Like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, the Psalmist follows the yellow-brick road to the Emerald City. His destination is set, and he will not be distracted along the way.

Vs. 103 As one enjoys the taste of "honey," so too can we taste the "word" of God and know that it is good (cf. Ps. 34:8). Interestingly, honey could refer to the

⁵ Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150, The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 3:419.

substance found in a beehive. More likely, however, the Hebrew term *deb-vash'* referred to a syrup derived from the fruit of a date or a fig as they were the most common sweetener in the Middle East.⁶ Regardless, the point the Psalmist is trying to make is that these precepts are "sweet." They brighten the pallet. Meaning, the Lord's commands refresh the soul and revive the mind. They take what is dull and make it delightful. And though God's promises are compared to honey, honey still pales in this comparison. How so? Honey is a resource to be consumed, and then it is gone; whereas, the sweetness of Scriptures is eternal. Long after the honeycomb is run dry, God's word will be dripping with delight. And even if there was a source of honey that never emptied, it still only has one flavor profile. God's word is a veritable smorgasbord of flavors.

Vs. 104 As he did in verse 97, where he expressed his affection for God's word, the Psalmist does not mince words when he says that he "hates every false way." The more you acquire a taste for the commandments, the more you will hate anything that does not taste familiar.⁷ With the same intensity in which he loved the scriptures, he loathes any path characterized by fallacies and untruths. The Hebrew word translated as "hate" here is the term *saw-nay'* and it carries the connotation of not only repulsion but also opposition.⁸ An example of this is when Joseph's brothers "hated" him so much that they not only threw him into a pit but also sold him into slavery (cf. Gen. 37:4, 8). Meaning, the Psalmist will not only be disgusted with the false way, but he will also do everything in his power to oppose every false way. Far from entertaining or even tolerating distortions of truth, the Psalmist takes it upon himself to uproot falsehood wherever and whenever he can. As much as he is *for* God's word, he is *against* the falsehoods, distortions, and tall tales.

"What's your takeaway?"

My takeaway this evening is this: God's word is sweeter and more satisfying than honey. Many times, in my preparation for Sundays or Wednesdays, I have been so enamored with the Scriptures that I have forgotten to eat. This does not mean I do not become ravenous

⁶ Goldingay (2008), 3:420.

⁷ Kidner, Derek, *Psalms 73-150*, The Kidner Classic Commentaries, (Downers Grove, ILL: Inter-Varsity Press Academic, Reprint, 2008), p. 463.

⁸ Goldingay (2008), 3:420.

afterwards. But even the best of meals cannot be compared to the joy I have when studying God's word.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | Psalm 119: Learning the Letters of Scripture | Week 14

TITLE: Mem

TEXT: Psalm 119:97-104

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: