

October 13, 2021 | Wednesday Night Live | Psalm 119: Learning the Letters of Scripture

Week 19 | Psalm 119:137-144 | Tsadi

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

Given that various cognates of the word "right" appear in our stanza, it should come as no surprise that just ethics is at the forefront of our Psalmist's mind. In fact, he uses five different Hebrew terms to describe the concept of morality: *tseh'-dek* (n.), *tsad-deek'* (adj.), *tsed-aw-kaw'* (fem. n.), *yaw-shawr'* (adj.), *tsaw-raf'* (v.). What's more, our sojourner touches on the notion of biblical righteousness seven times, which, given that the number seven is indicative of perfection, it appears this stanza must be a testament to the impeccability of scriptural rectitude. In other words, the one who desires to understand notions like rightness and justness need only open the pages of the Bible and begin reading. The word of God is an exemplary teacher when tasked with distinguishing between right and wrong.

READ: Psalm 119:137-144 (ESV)

Tsadi

¹³⁷ Righteous are you, O Lord, and right are your rules.

¹³⁸ You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness and in all faithfulness.

¹³⁹ My zeal consumes me, because my foes forget your words.

¹⁴⁰ Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it.

¹⁴¹ I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.

¹⁴² Your righteousness is righteous forever, and your law is true.

¹⁴³ Trouble and anguish have found me out, but your commandments are my delight.

¹⁴⁴ Your testimonies are righteous forever; give me understanding that I may live.

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

Vs. 137 The Psalmist uses the Hebrew term *tsad-deek'* ("righteous") to describe Jehovah. Coincidentally, Moses gives an apt description of God towards the end of his life in Deut. 32:4 and he uses the very same term: "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just [tsad-deek'] and upright is he." For God to be described as *tsad-deek'* speaks of His infallible character. The Lord is the standard by

which all things are compared. And from that well of God's faultlessness, He has given us "rules" that are in and of themselves *yaw-shawr'* ("right"). Interestingly, this is the only occurrence of the Hebrew term *yaw-shawr'* in Psalm 119, though it is reasonably common throughout Scripture (119x's). As it is here in our verse, the word is usually translated as "right" throughout the rest of the Bible. This indicates that *yaw-shawr'* most often carries a moral connotation to it. However, its more everyday usage suggests that something is "straight" (cf. Jer. 31:9; Ez. 1:7, 23). Hence, this is why *yaw-shawr'* often appears as "upright" when indicating something or someone that isn't morally bent over, or, as the Bible often puts it, "unjust," in their dealings (cf. Job 1:1, 8; Pro. 11:3; 12:6; 29:27). The Psalmist is trying to show that God's "right" rules are an extension of His "righteous" essence. Many an unlawful law has been made by lawless men. God is not so. Every rule, regulation, and requirement He has ever made has been right because God Himself is righteous.

Vs. 138 Essentially, the Psalmist restates verse 137. His line of reasoning goes something like this: Because God is "righteous" and, by extension, his rules are "right," we can assume that it is amid "righteousness" that God has established ("appointed") His word ("testimonies"). Meaning, not only is God's essence righteous and His utterance right but also God's residence is righteousness. Justice is the dwelling place—the domicile, the abode, the home—of the Lord. What's more, God's word was also established in *em-oo-naw'* ("faithfulness"), a term designating that something is firm, steadfast, and abiding (cf. Ex. 17:12; Ps. 92:2; 119:30, 75, 86; Pro. 28:20). The Psalmist himself has defined *em-oo-naw'* earlier in verse 90 when he said, "Your faithfulness [*em-oo-naw'*] endures to all generations; you have established the earth, and it stands fast." What's more, the prophet uses these same two nouns when describing the Messiah Isaiah 11:5, "Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins." Among the many discrepancies between the human and the divine, God's unchanging and unerring attributes are two of the most significant differences. We are like shifting sand; whereas, the Lord is like standing stone.

Vs. 139 *Kin-aw'* is more often translated as "jealousy" (cf. Num. 5:14; Pro. 6:34; 14:30; 27:4). But, as it is here, it can also mean "zeal" (cf. Ps. 69:9; Isa 37:32;

Ezek. 5:13). Meaning, when we are jealous for the wrong things, we should discern that we're being envious; whereas, when we are jealous for the right things, we should recognize that we're being zealous. Essentially, all *kin-aw'* indicates is that someone has a great passion or desire for something (cf. Ja. 4:5).¹ The object of *kin-aw'* is what determines its morality. In the case of our Psalmist, he is "consumed" with fervor and passion for God's "word" (cf. vs. 20). In this case, the object of his jealousy is a good thing. Interestingly, this is the kind of zeal that brought great revival to the Children of Israel during the reign of King Jehu (cf. 2 Ki. 9-10). And while Jehu does not end his rule as well as he began it, he and Elisha were used to great effect in uprooting the worship of Baal from Israel. And like Jehu, our sojourner is so consumed with this passion for God's word that it upsets him when his enemies ("foes") have not remembered ("forgotten") the Scriptures. What's more, it seems this vehemence may be involuntary. After all, Song of Solomon describes *kin-aw'* like a fire that comes all in its wake (Song 8:6). Our sojourner cannot control himself in the face of such deliberate disobedience. To use a modern idiom, he is triggered, in the best possible way, whenever his adversaries appear to neglect the Lord's precious promises.

Vs. 140 Metaphorically, the Psalmist said that God's word has been *tsaw-raf'* ("tried"). This is a metallurgist's term used to describe the refining process (cf. Jud. 17:4; Neh. 3:8; Ps. 66:10; Pro. 25:4). But using *tsaw-raf'* to describe the Scriptures doesn't really fit. What kind of procedure could make the Bible purer than it already is? Instead, what the Psalmist must mean is that he's personally tested the principles of God's word and proven them to be true in his own life. Essentially, our sojourner is looking at us and saying, "Trust me. They're reliable. The ground beneath your feet isn't nearly as trustworthy as God's word." For countless centuries, scholars of every ilk have poured over each word, hence the past tense of "tried."² By today's standards, it is not only the best-selling book of all time, but no other book has had more books written about it than the Bible. Skeptics and critics have tried attacking and dismantling the Scriptures in countless ways, but still,

¹ Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150, The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 3:432.

² Allen, Leslie C., *Psalms 101-150*, The World Biblical Commentary, Volume 21, (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), p. 191.

the Bible stands. Saints and Christians have been attempting to study and apply the Scriptures in countless different ways, but the Bible springs anew even after all these years. And it is because of this, our Psalmist says that he “loves it.” The sheer dependability of God’s word fuels a dedication to God’s word. What’s not to love? God’s word never fails. It never makes a mistake. It is the thing that remains. It renews, remakes, and revives us. It makes wise the simple. It guides us. It directs us. It secures us. Once the Scriptures are known to us, we cannot help but love them.

- Vs. 141 To be “little” (tsaw-eer'), in the Scriptures, meant that a person was the youngest in the family (cf. Gen. 25:23; 29:26; 43:33; Jud. 6:15). However, it could also mean someone was of "little" significance and not necessarily the last in a family line (cf. 1 Sam. 9:21; Mi. 5:2). This previous connotation is what our Psalmist means when he says that he is "small." Like that of a juvenile, his standing in the community was not very prestigious.³ What's more, he tells us that he is also “despised.” Meaning, among his countryman, our sojourner not only garners very little respect, but he is also sorely hated. Yet, despite this lack of respect among his peers, the Psalmist abides ("do not forget") by the "precepts" of God. His equals' accolades and approval hold very little weight compared to his love for God's word (cf. vs. 140). He performs for an audience of One. The only praise he needs is to hear "well done thy good and faithful servant" (cf. Mat. 25:23).
- Vs. 142 We return once again to the loosely tied theme of this stanza: righteousness. Here, the Psalmist uses both *tsed-aw-kaw'* ("righteousness") and *tseh'-dek* ("righteous") to describe their interminable ("forever") natures. Like God Himself, His rightness has no beginning or end. It is not bound by time and space. Meaning, popular opinion may change; but God’s righteousness remains unchanged. After all, why change when God's word ("law") is "true." It shouldn't have to adapt to the changing tides. It is like the mountain unmoving and unchanging, always where it is supposed to be.
- Vs. 143 In the very midst of “trouble” and “anguish,” the Psalmist finds “delight.” How? Because circumstances do not dictate our wanderer’s feelings, God's "commandments" do. Even though difficulties and heartache may seek

³ VanGemeren, William A., *Psalms*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Volume 5, Editors, Tremper Longman, III & David E. Garland, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Academic, 2008), p. 884.

("found") him out, the writer of Psalm 119 finds joy in God's Word (cf. vs. 14, 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92). The Scriptures can turn a dreadful situation into a cheerful one. After all, it alone gives you a bird's eye view regarding the state of affairs in one's life. Only the Bible can tell you, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I [Jesus] have overcome the world." (Jn. 16:33) Or, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28) Lastly, "And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." (Gal. 6:9) Long before someone has given up the fight, they have given up the Scriptures.

Vs. 144 The stanza ends as it had begun with speaking about the "righteousness" (*tseh'-dek*) of God's rules ("testimonies"). What's more, it echoes the same ideal of vs. 142, but instead of God's righteous being "forever," it centers on the permanence of God's word. Thus, when these two verses are taken side-by-side, it seems our Psalmist is making a correlation between both God's righteousness and God's law. He is essentially saying that, like God's uprightness, the Scriptures were true in the past, are true in the present, and will remain true in the future. God's word and righteousness are the very definitions of permanence. And should things such as these, unbound by reality, interact with mere mortals, the result is "life." Through "understanding" the Scriptures, our Psalmist is given a meaning and purpose to his existence. And, as always, our wanderer will not be able to grasp even the barest principle unless it is God who grants ("gives") him comprehension (cf. vs. 27, 34, 73, 104, 125, 130, 169).

"What's your takeaway?"

My takeaway this evening is this: no other work has been as studied or scrutinized as God's word. The skeptics have yet to tear it down. And the saints have yet to fully exhaust it. What a humbling thing to study a book that represents the collective works of various authors who were all inspired by God and written over the course of centuries. It is as tried and true as anything could get. Yet, we must remember, "Trust in the reliability of God's word is directly proportionate to one's trust in the Lord himself."⁴ Though the Scriptures have stood the test of

⁴ VanGemeren (2008), p. 884.

time, they will not do us a lick of difference in our own lives if we do not believe they are what they say they are.

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: