

November 17, 2021 | Wednesday Night Live | Psalm 119: Learning the Letters of Scripture

Week 23 | Psalm 119:169-176 | Tav

Today, we move on to the twenty-second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Tav. <Insert Picture>

In this last stanza, the Psalmist oscillates between petitions and praises. And, somehow, that seems an appropriate way to close out the single largest chapter in the Bible. After all, our days shouldn't only be filled with moving appeals to God for help; they should also be filled with melodic accolades to God for how He's already helped.

READ: Psalm 119:169-176 (ESV)

Taw

¹⁶⁹ Let my cry come before you, O Lord; give me understanding according to your word!

¹⁷⁰ Let my plea come before you; deliver me according to your word.

¹⁷¹ My lips will pour forth praise, for you teach me your statutes.

¹⁷² My tongue will sing of your word, for all your commandments are right.

¹⁷³ Let your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts.

¹⁷⁴ I long for your salvation, O Lord, and your law is my delight.

¹⁷⁵ Let my soul live and praise you, and let your rules help me.

¹⁷⁶ I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments.

What principles is the Psalmist trying to instill in this twenty-second stanza?

Vs. 169 In one way or another, the Psalmist has asked God ("Lord") to grant him "understanding" a sum total of five times throughout Psalm 119 (cf. 27, 34, 73, 144). Yet, in this, his last request to understand, he uses the Hebrew noun *rinnâh* ("cry"). As one might expect, this term expresses intense emotional appeal (cf. 1 Ki. 8:28; Ps. 17:1; 142:6). However, it is also a word attached to feelings of great happiness and even praises throughout the Bible (cf. Ps. 42:4; 105:43; 107:22; Pro. 11:10). For instance, David juxtaposing God's wrath and warmth, says in Psalm 30:4-5, "Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the

night, but joy (*rinnâh*) comes with the morning.” Curiously, another Psalmist intermingles these two ideas of suffering and rejoicing when he says, “Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy (*rinnâh*)! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy (*rinnâh*), bringing his sheaves with him.” It would seem that praise and pain may coexist at varying times in our lives, contentedly riding alongside one another. They are sibling sentiments. However, at least as far as this verse is concerned, the Psalmist’s anguished singing is not some aimless cry but is a specific plea for God to give him the capacity to comprehend what he’s reading when he opens God’s “word.”

Vs. 170 Whereas the Psalmist used the Hebrew term *rinnâh* (“cry”) in verse 169, he now uses the word *techinnâh* (“plea”). And unlike *rinnâh*, which had dual connotations, *techinnâh* is a term used exclusively by someone trying to gain the favor of a superior (cf. 1 Ki. 8:28, 52; 9:3; Dan. 9:20). An old but more descriptive translation of this term is the word “supplication,” as it highlights the appeal-like emphasis at the heart of *techinnâh*. Unsurprisingly, it shows up in several places in the Bible, but probably the best passage that explains the implications of this term comes in 2 Chronicles 33. There, we’re told about King Manasseh, who led the inhabitants of Jerusalem to stray so far from God that they ended up becoming worse than the “nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites” (cf. 2 Chr. 33:9). They did things that not even those who had no knowledge of God would do. And, for this, God judged King Manasseh by sending the Assyrians to capture this wayward monarch. In a shocking turn of events, this whole ordeal actually humbled the King of Judah enough for him to pray and ask God for forgiveness. And so, the Bible says, “God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea (*techinnâh*) and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God.” (2 Chr. 33:13) This show of mercy by God led the King to abandon his former ways leading the inhabitants of Jerusalem to come as near to a revival as they had come in years (cf. 2 Chr. 33:17). And just as Manasseh entreated God’s favor so that he might be delivered from the Assyrians, so too does our Psalmist beg the Lord to “deliver” him according to “God’s word.” So, whether a defiant king or a devoted wanderer, the Lord will save all those who bow to him on supplicative knees.

- Vs. 171 The "praise" implicit in the Psalmist's pleas of verse 169 is now made explicit. Using an emphatic expression, our wanderer says that his "lips pour forth" with wholehearted worship of the one true God. The Hebrew term used to translate that phrase, "pour forth," literally indicates something gushing out uncontrollably, sort of like water from a great fountainhead. To borrow a modern-day colloquialism, the psalm-singer is basically saying that he's blurting out his praises before God. Interestingly, when this term is used in a negative sense, such as when it's utilized to describe the wicked, the word holds the connotation that they are literally "bellowing" or "belching" their vile deeds (Psa. 59:6-7; cf. Pro. 15:2, 28; Eccl. 10:1). Thus, it seems our psalm-singer wants us to see that, not unlike sudden and unexpected burp, he just simply cannot contain himself (cf. Lu. 19:40). Trying to stem the tide of his adoration for God would be like trying to halt a tsunami. It just isn't possible. And so, without constraint, our wanderer lifts his voice to the heavens. But why is he so overwhelmed with praise? Our sojourner tells us it is because the Lord has taught him the Scriptures ("statues"). And, as you'll remember, this is the very thing he requested in vs. 169. Thus, it is no wonder that his mouth overflows with praise. To have one's petition answered in such a speedily fashion would surely make anyone bubble up with gratitude.¹
- Vs. 172 Here, the Psalmist moves from speaking about his "lips" to talking about his "tongue." This tongue, he explains, intones ("sings") the melodies of the "word" itself. Thus, it would seem our sojourner has finally admitted what we have known all along that he is indeed the psalm-singer. And who would argue with him? Is there a better songbook than "all the commandments" themselves? They, after all, are the only thing that is "right" in this world. They are the only words that bring the soul in harmony with God. In fact, this is why the apostle Paul twice explained to the church that to sing the Psalms is not only highly encouraged, but it is also evidence that a believer is filled with the Spirit (cf. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). The spirit-filled Christian puts the Scriptures to song. Thus, not only should our everyday words be seasoned with the pages of the Bible, so too ought our lyrics be saturated by the Word. Or, as the great reformer, Martin Luther, put it, "...it was not

¹

VanGemenen, 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. 889.

without reason that the fathers and prophets wanted nothing else to be associated as closely with the Word of God as music. Therefore, we have so many hymns and Psalms where message and music join to move the listener's soul.... After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming [the Word] through music and by providing sweet melodies with words."²

- Vs. 173 The Psalmist's confidence in his standing with God is further exemplified when he asks that the Lord's "hand be ready to help" him. Interestingly, through the prophet Isaiah, God reassures the people of Israel using similar terminology: "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off; fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand...For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who says to you, "Fear not, I am the one who helps you." (Isa. 41:9-10, 13) There is no road too treacherous and no enemy too monstrous that can hurt those whose hand is secured in the Almighty's. And why can our psalm-singer be so bold? Because he has "chosen" the Lord's "precepts." This choice has been set as far back as verse 30. Just as God has chosen him, our wanderer has chosen God. He has looked for guidance from the hand of God in the past, and he'll need it for the journey that is still yet ahead.
- Vs. 174 In all of Psalm 119, our wanderer has said that God's word ("law") is his "delight" 9 times (cf. vs. 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143). And when one takes such enjoyment in the Scriptures, it garners a hope in the promises of the Scriptures. So, our wanderer says that he "longs" for God's deliverance ("salvation"). Interestingly, this is the 7th time he's spoken about his longing for the things of God (cf. vs. 20, 40, 81, 82, 123, 131). The more you read the Bible and believe in the future it predicts, the more a yearning begins to grow deep inside. This craving to have God fulfill his promises seeps into our very bones like an aching weariness that starts to set in after a long hike. And with each passing step, it is almost as if our muscles and tendons cry out, "How much longer must we endure?!" (cf. vs. 84)

² From Luther's 1538 "Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae lucundae* [Pleasant Harmonies]," LW 53: 323-324

- Vs. 175 “Let me live” (cf. vs. 17, 77, 116, 144) is similar to the Psalmist’s other petitions that God “give him life” (cf. vs. 25, 37, 40, 50, 88, 93, 107, 149, 154, 156, 159). Thus, combined, that’s a grand total of 16 times that our psalm-singer has asked the Bringer of Life to provide him with life. But here, in verse 175, he’s requested life not because he’s in peril, as before, but because he wants to “praise” the Lord. Our wanderer, who has so far only alternated between prayers and praises in this stanza, now intertwines them together so that one feeds the other and vice versa. After all, only because God has given us life can we praise His name. Yet, in praising His name, we find the meaning of life itself: to glorify God. And those same “rules” which taught him to pray and praise have also aided (“help”) him along this way. Just as a lamp greatly improves one’s journey, so has God’s word improved this psalm-singer’s life (cf. vs. 105). There is little doubt that when the Psalmist is down on his luck, he turns first to God’s word before turning to anyone else.
- Vs. 176 This is the only concrete example of a tricolon in all of Psalm 119 (i.e., “Veni, vidi, vici.” = I came, I saw, I conquered.).³ Thus, unlike the 175 verses that preceded it, verse 176 has three distinct lines instead of only two: “*I have gone astray like a lost sheep*” | “*seek your servant*” | “*for I do not forget your commandments.*” And immediately, we’re struck by an apparent contradiction. If he’s said that he’s wandered like a lost sheep, how can the Psalmist say that he’s NOT forgotten God’s commandments? Doesn’t straying automatically imply sinfulness? The answer is...sort of. Honestly, if it wasn’t for the blatant incongruity of what he’s said, we would’ve never tried to look to a deeper meaning. You see, yes, most of the time, a wandering sheep is a symbolic way of referring to a wayward soul—i.e., a person that’s deliberately left the proverbial pasture (cf. vs. 10, 21, 110, 118). However, all sheep have shepherds. And, whether a shepherd is purposefully leading their flock away from God or should they be incompetent, the effect is the same: a lost sheep (cf. Ezek. 34).⁴ And while this does not absolve the sheep of their sin due to their ignorance, a portion of the blame rests squarely on the shoulders of the failed shepherd. After

³ Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150, The Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 3:443.

⁴ Allen, Leslie C., *Psalm 101-150*, The World Biblical Commentary, Volume 21, (Nashville, TN; Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), p. 192.

all, the serpent was also condemned alongside all of humanity in Gen. 3. Jesus even points to this principle when speaking about the religious leaders of his day in Matt. 15:14 where he says, “they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” He picks up this idea later when he levels seven woes against the Scribes and Pharisees for how they’ve mishandled their duties as shepherds over the flock of Israel (cf. Matt. 23). Ultimately, no one is blameless. As Isaiah put it, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way...” (Isa. 53:6). But sadly, some bad actors have helped us along in our waywardness. They have given us bad directions. And they have instilled in us some bad practices. To this latter possibility, the Psalmist wants the Lord to “seek” him out. He even mixes his metaphors by likening himself to not only a sheep but a “servant” as well to prove his loyalty. Thus, either way, whether the man or beast is being led astray by some nefarious leader, the Psalmist has asked to be sought out by God. Essentially, though he has boldly asserted that he hasn’t forgotten God’s word, our sojourner knows enough to know that he can still be led afield. After all, at best, he is nothing more than gullible sheep. And even a die-in-the-ditch Bible geek, like our psalm-singer, can still be led into parts unknown, getting lost in the process. Only the Good Shepherd is capable of finding His lost sheep. And, after releasing that sheep from whatever hole it’s fallen into, the Shepherd will take His lamb, put him on His shoulders, and rejoicing will carry him back home (cf. Lu. 15:1-7; Jn. 10:11-18).⁵ And so, 176 verses end not on a note of confidence about how one knows a bunch of scriptures, but, instead, the largest chapter of the Bible ends on a note that rings with the sovereignty of God. Yes, our sojourner knows the Scriptures. But, more than that, he knows his God. And even though his knowledge may fail him, his God never will. The Good Shepherd always finds His lost sheep (cf. Lu. 19:10).

"What's your takeaway?"

My takeaway this evening is this: life lives between the pages of Scripture.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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TEXT: Psalm 119:169-176

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: