

1. Psalm 119: Delighting in the Word of the Lord

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[0 : 0 0] We do let's open up again at Psalm 119, on page 512.

For years and years, I have thought of the message of Psalm 119 as being simply, read your Bible.

Now I've been reading this psalm for some weeks now and thinking about it, and I've come to the conclusion that the heart of its message is, read your Bible. However, that message is conveyed with a great deal of variety and subtlety, and the power of the message is in the subtleties and the variations.

Now Willie Phillip has kindly asked me to speak on this great psalm for five Sunday evenings, and I trust that as we read it together, it will teach us not only to love the word of the Lord, but to love the Lord himself.

What I want to do each Sunday evening is to open up one of the great themes in the psalm. There are several great themes, and tonight it's the theme of delighting in the word of the Lord.

[1 : 2 5] But I need to spend a little time introducing the psalm first. In fact, at least half of this first sermon will be introduction of the whole psalm, and we'll just have a shorter second half on delighting in the words of the Lord.

So introduction first, and I've got four points for you here. The first thing you'll notice is how long the psalm is. 176 verses to be precise, which makes it more than twice as long as the second longest psalm in the book of Psalms.

You'll also see that it's divided up into stanzas or sections of eight verses each, and each eight-verse section has a heading. Just have a look at the text there.

Aleph at the beginning, then Beth, then Gimel, and so forth. In English, that would be A, B, C. So these are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, 22 of them in all.

And if you multiply 22 by 8, you get 176. So there's an eight-verse section for every one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. And in the original Hebrew, and I guess this would have tested the ingenuity of the human author, each verse begins with the letter at the head of its section.

[2 : 4 0] So every verse between 1 and 8 begins in Hebrew with the letter Aleph, which is the letter A. Every verse between verse 9 and verse 16 begins with the letter Beth, B.

Quite something for the poet to achieve. Imagine trying to do the same thing in English. Not so hard, perhaps, with A, B, and C, but you try it with Q. Or X.

Get to the section beginning with X. Xylophone. X-ray. You'd struggle, wouldn't you? But this author does it with the Hebrew alphabet. Now, why?

Is he simply showing off his skill and language and poetry? Well, I doubt it. Isn't he saying this? Consider my subject, the words of God, the law of the Lord.

God's words encompass everything, the whole stretch of language and thought, A to Z, as we might say in English. So just as the Lord Jesus in the book of Revelation is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, who sums up the fullness of God's being in his own person, so the words of God, the life-giving words that God has caused to be written in the Bible, sum up everything we need to know about him for our blessedness and our salvation.

[3 : 59] I wonder, too, this is really speculation on my part, so don't take it too seriously, but I wonder if the psalmist is making a point in choosing to write eight verses in each stanza.

In the Bible, as I'm sure you know, the number that expresses perfection is the number seven. God created the universe in six days, and the seventh day, the day of his rest, is the day that speaks of completion and perfection.

The Holy Spirit in the Bible is sometimes described as having seven features or being sevenfold. The beast in the book of Revelation carries the number six, six, six, short of perfection, not once, not twice, but three times.

But here we have eight verses to each letter of the comprehensive alphabet of the word of God. So might our psalmist be saying to us, the word of God is perfect, in fact, better than perfect.

It isn't grade A, it's grade A star, it's perfection plus. Just look over the page to verse 96 in the psalm, which interestingly is the eighth verse in its section.

[5 : 16] Verse 96, I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad. In other words, I know the boundaries of perfection, I've been there, I've seen them, but your word bursts those boundaries.

It's even broader, it's exceedingly broad, it's beyond the limits of perfection. So there's the first thing, the very scheme and arrangement of the psalm suggests how perfect is the word of the Lord, and how it encompasses everything that God wants to say to the human race.

You might say that the Bible, God's word, is God's syllabus for educating the human race. It is a full syllabus, it lacks nothing.

Now second, let's notice the word which begins verse 1 and verse 2, and that is the word blessed or blessed. Apart from verse 12, which begins, blessed are you, O Lord, those two verses, 1 and 2, are the only two in the psalm which begin with the word blessed.

And the writer sets them right at the head of the psalm, because they're announcing the main theme of the psalm. Blessed are those who. So do you see, this psalm is not simply about the word of God, not at all.

[6 : 35] It's about those who keep the words of God, those who obey the words of God, those who walk in them, and love them, and delight in them. And those people, verses 1 and 2 assure us, are blessed by God.

Those people live under his blessing. Now friends, I'd like to do now something which a refined and sensitive and cultured preacher would never do.

I'm going to ask you to put up your hand right up in the air if you would love, through your life, to be blessed by God. Anyone? Stick them up. Okay, and down again.

Now friends, according to verses 1 and 2, his blessing is available to you as long as you are prepared to walk in the law of the Lord, and to keep his testimonies, and to seek him with your whole heart.

So if your loyalties are divided, and you want to come perhaps to church, but also want to avoid certain aspects of the Bible's teaching, of course you'll miss the blessing.

[7 : 42] But if your heart's desire is to serve and love the Lord, and obey his teaching, you will be blessed by him, and the devil himself will not be able to stop God from blessing you.

Now the Lord is very clear in the Bible that his great desire is to bless his people. So back in Genesis chapter 1, verse 28, God blesses mankind, male and female, as he creates them.

Or think of Psalm 1, verses 1 and 2. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

So the blessed man is the man who resolutely shuns the ways of ungodliness, and instead delights in and thinks hard about the law of the Lord.

Now it's exactly the same in the teaching of Jesus. You remember as he begins the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapter 5, his great sermon about the Christian life, his first phrase is, Blessed are the poor in spirit.

[8 : 50] And he then lists nine categories of people who are blessed by God. You find the same theme again at the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, at the beginning of that book, chapter 1, verse 3.

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it. So the blessing of God, it's given at the creation of mankind, it's then promised in Psalm 1 and Psalm 119, to those who love and obey the Lord's words.

The promised blessing is re-emphasized in the teaching of Jesus, and by the Apostle John. So it's a great Bible theme. It is the will of God to bless his people.

Just as the glove fits onto the hand, so the blessing of God is applied to the lives of those who obey the Lord's words. If, on the other hand, we're set on a course of disobedience, we can't expect God to bless us.

But if our hearts desire to obey his words, those first two verses of Psalm 119 assure us that we will be blessed, indeed that we are blessed already.

[10 : 03] Now does a little chill wind blow in your heart at this point? Might you be saying to yourself, yes, I can see that blessing is given to those who love the words of the Lord and obey them, but is that me?

I would like it to be me, but is it me? Well, let me point out a most encouraging feature of Psalm 119, and that is that it moves back and forth between two modes of expression.

In some verses, the psalmist is bold and confident. So, for example, look at verse 16. I will delight in your statutes. I will not forget your word.

He's ready for obedience there, isn't he? He's full of it. He's full on and definite, committed. He's rather like the man who sings, I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back.

No turning back. Now that's his first mode, and verse 16 is a prime example of it. But his other mode is a mode of hesitation and uncertainty.

[11 : 06] You'll see it, for example, in verse 5. Oh, that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes. He wants to keep and obey what the Lord has commanded, but in verse 5 he's recognizing the weakness of his will.

He'd love to be steadfast, but he's not quite sure that he can be. Now, don't these two modes exactly describe Christian experience?

There are times in the Christian life when we're full of boldness and purpose and confidence. We feel that nothing can stop us from following a course of joyful obedience.

So we like to sing John Bunyan's words, there's no discouragement, shall make him once relent, his first avowed intent to be a pilgrim. In other words, you might say, come ye hither, world flesh and the devil, and I'll give you a fourpenny one and the chops.

I'm prepared to take you on. But there are other times when we're very conscious of our moral frailty and weakness and rightly mistrustful of our willingness to obey the Lord.

[12 : 13] And we know both of these modes in our experience, don't we? Now, look with me at the first 16 verses of this psalm, the two sections, Aleph and Beth. I think we have eight verses in the confident, bold first mode and eight verses in the hesitant and fearful second mode.

The confident verses are the first four, look with me, and the last four. Whereas the hesitant verses are the middle section from verse 5 to verse 12.

So in verses 1 and 2, we've touched on that already, blessing for those who walk in God's law and so on, verses 3 and 4 are similarly definite and confident, who also do no wrong but walk in his ways.

You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. But suddenly the whole mood changes. Verse 5, Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes.

He's openly admitting that steadfast obedience is something that he has not yet mastered. In verse 6, he admits the possibility of being put to shame if he might take his eye off the Lord's commandments.

[13 : 26] In verse 7, he confesses that he's not yet learned the Lord's righteous rules. And in verse 8, he's saying, Lord, I will keep your statutes, but help, I can only do it if you're with me.

If you were to forsake me, I'd be dead in the water. And so it goes on. Verse 9 shows how aware the writer is of a young man's temptations. Verse 10 starts well, but then sees the horrid possibility of wandering away from the Lord.

Verse 11 confesses the writer's fear of sin. And in verse 12, the writer is begging the Lord to teach him his statutes, because presumably, he still has so much to learn about them and about how to obey them.

But then in verses 13 to 16, he's back into that confident mode when there isn't any suggestion of the possibility of coming unstuck. So we have these two confident sections sandwiching two hesitant sections.

Isn't that just like the Christian life? We have moments of great confidence, perhaps the moment when we make, when we stand up in a service of this kind and make our vows, our promises of church membership.

[14 : 39] We stand out in the very front, looked at by all, with our smart haircut, assuring the minister and the elders and everybody of our full intentions of faithful service and lifelong commitment.

And then we wake up the following morning, Monday, a grey November morning. And all that confidence has drained out of us. And what we're aware of is not our boldness, but our weakness.

And we pray as in verse 8, I will keep your statutes, but do not utterly forsake me. Please don't leave me, Lord. I'm as weak as water.

And for this reason, I think we're going to find that this psalm will encourage us as well as challenge us. This writer is a real human being. He has times of assurance, but he also wobbles.

He's not a paragon of all the virtues. He's not a man of perfect character with whom we could never identify. He is someone like us, and therefore he can teach us.

[15 : 42] Now thirdly, let's settle it in our minds that this psalm is not making the word of God into an idol. This psalm is sometimes accused of being a bibliolatrous psalm.

Well, it isn't like that at all. It is true that virtually every one of its 176 verses refers to the words of God. And it speaks of them under a number of different titles.

His precepts, his statutes, his laws or law, his rules, his commandments, his testimonies, his promise, his word. Each of those terms has a slightly different shade of meaning, and the Hebrew experts will distinguish one from the other.

But for our purposes, we can take them all to refer to the whole Bible, which is God's word written for our comfort and instruction and salvation. But the one thing this psalm does not do is to turn God's words into an idol.

Yes, it teaches us to love God's words and to delight in them and to obey them and much more, but always and only because they are God's words. The psalmist loves them because they teach him about God.

[16 : 55] The words of scripture come from God and they lead us to God. Let me give a simple illustration about the words and the person they come from.

When I was courting my wife and we were engaged to be married, I was working as a young minister in Manchester and she was a medical student in St. Andrews in Fife. Manchester to St. Andrews is a round trip of 593 miles.

I discovered and in those days pigeon posts had become obsolete and email was not yet a twinkle in its father's eye so we used to write letters to each other about twice a week.

So I would be in my study down in Manchester whenever I heard the postman coming up the garden path and shoving the mail through the letterbox I would sprint to the front door, I'd pick it all up I'd throw aside things like the bills and letters from the bishop and all that sort of trivia.

But if there was a letter from Catherine I would tear it open and drink in these wonderful words You are my darling blue-eyed rabbit. Now think of it I didn't love the words for their own sake did I?

[18 : 15] I loved the words because of the person they came from. I treasured those words because I wanted to love and know the person who wrote them. Now that's what the Bible is like.

The words are ordinary human words at one level. They're simply black print on a white page. But the psalmist treasures them so much because they are God's words.

They tell him about God and God's ways. They teach him how to live the life of the believer. They bring him comfort and assurance and real strength real strength from God.

They strengthen his love for God his knowledge of God. They're like a love letter from heaven. He doesn't idolise the words he loves them because they bind him to the Lord who loves him.

We're now fourth and last introductory point. As we study this psalm over the next few weeks I think we'll discover that the psalmist's attitude towards the law of God is the opposite to the Pharisees' attitude to the law of God that we find in the Gospels.

[19 : 22] Now just think of the Pharisees with whom Jesus so often had to tangle. They considered themselves the experts in the law of God. They were the great students of it. They prided themselves in their knowledge of it.

They were the doctors of the law, the official teachers of it. And yet Jesus had to condemn them. He had to condemn them because they misread the purpose of the law so profoundly.

Now how did they misread it? Well Paul the Apostle who was himself trained as a Pharisee writes this in Romans 9 verse 31 that Israel pursued a law that would lead to righteousness but did not succeed in reaching that law.

Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith but as if it were based on works. Now of all people the Apostle Paul was able to understand where the Pharisees had gone wrong.

They were legalists. They came to believe that they would be accepted by God as long as they punctiliously kept every one of God's laws as well as lots of other laws that they'd added.

[20 : 32] So they became blind to the fact that they were sinners who needed to be saved because they couldn't keep God's laws. The legalistic Pharisee says I can do it.

If I'm sufficiently earnest and zealous and hardworking I can make it into God's favour under my own steam. But the writer of Psalm 119 is saying I can't do it.

I'm a sinner. I'm a straying sheep. That's the way he describes himself in the very final verse of the Psalm. He's saying teach me your commandments O Lord. Yes I love them but how I need your grace and help if I'm to obey them.

The legalist the Pharisee is self-righteous and proud but this author of Psalm 119 is humble and trusting. Now I guess we all have a touch of Phariseeism in us don't we?

The legalist who frowns at the shortcomings of others. Well if that's true I trust that Psalm 119 will jet wash the legalism out of our systems and teach us to love God's law humbly and in a way that depends upon his grace and not upon our efforts and work.

[21 : 51] Well that's been quite a long introduction and if the person next to you has dropped into a coma please do stick a pin into him or her and tell him that the sermon proper is now beginning but don't worry I shan't put too much on your plate in one sitting I promise.

I want us to see now how this Psalm teaches us to delight in God's words. The first instance of delight the word delight comes in verse 14 in the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches and then you'll see the word appears two verses later verse 16 I will delight in your statutes I will not forget your word and that word delight crops up ten times throughout this Psalm at regular intervals.

It's a strong recurrent theme and it immediately helps us to see something vitally important about the way the Psalmist regards the words of God.

Now when you read the book of Deuteronomy which has a lot to say about God's commandments the emphasis there is almost exclusively on obedience to God's words hear O Israel and obey the voice of the Lord your God that's the tone of Deuteronomy and I'm not aware of a single reference in Deuteronomy to the people of Israel delighting in God's commandments now they're to love him as they obey him but Deuteronomy doesn't teach them to delight in the commandments of God but here in Psalm 119 while obedience is strongly emphasized and we'll look at that next week but there's this lovely additional element of delight now let's think about that word don't you think the word delight is an extreme word I can't think of another verb which expresses the same idea quite as intensely let me draw a parallel think of a hungry young man there are quite a few sitting here this evening I think but think of a young hungry young man crossing Bath Street to the Blue Lagoon fish and chip shop later this evening and having bought his fish supper and put the salt and stuff on it he examines it he tastes it he enjoys it he relishes it and he delights in it there's no other verb higher up on the same scale is there when we delight in something it is a great great joy now that sense of joy is what the psalmist is conveying to us here in verse 14 he likens it to the joy that a man of the world has when he counts his riches so let's look carefully at verses 14 to 16 and I'll try to bring from them three thoughts to fix in our minds first then delight in

God's words comes with meditating on God's words notice how verse 15 I will meditate on your precepts is sandwiched between verses 14 and 16 which both speak of delighting in God's words now that's no accident the same combination of delight and meditation comes in Psalm 1 verse 2 where the blessed man is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night so the delight comes with the meditation what then does it mean to meditate upon God's words well it simply means to think about them and to take your time over it and there's no suggestion here in this word meditate that we need to learn some kind of special mental technique which only some spiritual guru could teach us not at all some people look at this word meditation and they shy away from it because they imagine that you've perhaps got to get into some very peculiar physical position you know meditate get your leg up round over you your elbow or whatever and then perform some kind of esoteric psychological technique which will rid your mind of all the clutter a bit like the dentist swilling your mouth out after filling your cavities and then with this freed mind you're able to meditate no that kind of religious mumbo jumbo is quite alien to the bible all our psalmist means is think about

[26 : 28] God's words he's not prescribing some method for doing it how do you think about other types of words that you read what do you read the newspaper novels auto car pc world aristotle now having read the words of whatever it is that you're reading what do you then do with them well you think about them you mull them over many of them you quickly forget because they're trivial but the best parts you digest and enjoy and the very best parts you delight in and very importantly those parts you delight in begin to shape your character they rearrange your mental furniture they modify what you love and value now of course with the bible there are no trivial parts it's all straight from heaven these words are more enduring than the created order do you remember how jesus said heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away and the growing christian learns to meditate on god's words and sooner or later that meditation is going to start bringing delight it must do it must do these are the words of the father who loves us so deeply that not only has he given his son jesus to die for us he also cares about our happiness and about our mental serenity and yes our delight and we're going to discover over these weeks that the writer of psalm 119 was also a man who was troubled and afflicted and persecuted so the delight he speaks of here is not delight in the absence of trouble it's delight in the midst of trouble that is always the bible's view of the believer's life do you remember how jesus said to his disciples in this world you will have tribulation but the truth is that the delight and the tribulation are experienced by us simultaneously at one level in our mind and heart we may be facing stress and pressure every day and at times we'll be facing real affliction some of you I'm sure are facing real affliction at this very moment and yet simultaneously at a deeper level of heart and mind we delight in god's words and promises and commandments for example is it possible to delight in god's words when you're in a hospital bed facing a serious illness or operation of course it is in fact such an experience may bring you greater delight in god's words than you ever had when you were in the best of health if you ask me well edward tell us what are the best times to meditate on god's words i think i would say on your way to work on your way home from work when you're out for a walk when you're eating and if you're eating with somebody else why not meditate on the words with that somebody the family meal time can be a great opportunity for vocalizing our thinking about the words of god and also do let me recommend three o'clock in the morning what do you normally think about when you wake up at three in the morning you worry don't you why not think about the words of god instead and if like me you possess you're fortunate enough to possess an energetic dog why don't you take two things with you on your dog walks a the dog and b a bible verse to chew over it's a great thing to think about in the cold fresh air so friends let's not deny ourselves one of the greatest delights of the christian life the delight that comes through meditating on god's

words let's chew them over let's mull them over let's marinate ourselves in them and allow them over the decades to alter the whole landscape of the inside of our heads second delight in god's words leads us to understand god's ways look how our psalmist puts it in verse 14 he doesn't say in your testimonies I delight he says in the way of your testimonies I delight which I think means I delight in the whole great revelation of your mind and plan and purpose as your testimonies reveal it at a lower level you could say something similar about shakespeare that by reading all his plays and poems you get an insight a great insight into his mind and his view of life the written words reveal the ways of the one who wrote them so verse 15 says something similar

I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways so the meditation leads us to fix our eyes on god's doings his habits his plan and so on so our writer is teaching us to learn what god's ways are it's a rather unusual way of speaking about god though you do find it famously in isaiah chapter 55 for my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways my ways declares the lord for as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts so if god's ways are so very different from ours we don't naturally know them and we need to learn them and in our psalm it's the delighted meditation on god's precepts that enables us to fix our eyes on his ways let me give two examples of this briefly first our natural bent our natural bent is to love sin whereas god's way is to hate sin so how do we learn his way how do we learn to hate sin by fixing our eyes on his ways which we do by delightedly meditating on his precepts his way is to detest sin but that's not our natural way so we learn it from him as we learn his words or to give a second example our natural bent will always be to serve ourselves and to please ourselves god's way is to serve others if need be at great personal cost so as we read of god's ways in the scriptures we learn that particular characteristic of his life and being exemplified of course supremely in the ministry of jesus it isn't natural to us to serve others so we learn god's way in that respect by reading his words and as time goes on we learn one thing after the other about his ways and this process proves to be one startling revelation after another because everything about him is a reversal of our inward turning and self-centered mindset we want to know him and as we drink in his words so we learn his ways and how to follow them and then third and last delight in god's words fixes his words in our memory and our imagination look again at verse 16 i will delight in your statutes i will not forget your word now the first part of the verse and the second part belong together if we are bored with his statutes we'll quickly forget his word but when we delight in his statutes then they will be fixed into our minds now i'd like to encourage you friends whatever age you are this includes the older ones as well as the younger i want to encourage all of us to think of our minds and our memories as being not yet nearly full to capacity with god's words our minds are a little bit like the recall system of a computer you can stick a great deal of stuff into a computer so my friends tell me and most computers again so i'm told are not filled to anything like their capacity isn't that right your computer could take perhaps a hundred times more stuff than you put into it now our minds are just like that there are lots of files and compartments up in our heads which have nothing in them at the moment but fresh air and sawdust let's fill them we can stack them with god's words now the key to doing this is

not grim effort but rather as verse 16 tells us a spirit of delight in god's statutes it's the one who rejoices in god's statutes who doesn't forget his word as we delight in god's words our memory our very imagination becomes filled with them they'll even come into our dreams at times you know how people say that if you're learning to speak spanish you know when you're becoming fluent in spanish and that's when you start to dream in spanish now it's just the same with the bible when the bible begins to appear even in our dreams we know that it's getting deep into our systems we're delighting in it and in the wonderful god who speaks to us in it don't let's be pharisees or legalists when it comes to bible reading legalists and pharisees have hard faces don't they look at my face i can't do a hard face you're making me laugh but the pharisee or the legalist frowns much more than he smiles isn't that right the legalist will say if you're not reading your bible for at least an hour a day you're a wretch the legalist will make you watch the clock and he'll give you all sorts of rules which the bible itself never gives you of course you might even be your own legalist you might be saying these things to yourself but we can't be legalistic if we're delighting in god's words delight and legalism can never be bedfellows the one who delights in god's words opens the bible in just the same way as a hungry man sits down to a plate of steak and onions and chips and peas and tomatoes and mustard as the hungry man begins his meal he's not saying to himself with a grim face i must spend at least one hour eating this plate of food no with a squeeze out of the brown sauce bottle he's away he's not timing himself he's enjoying himself and as we delight in god's words we will become delighted people we will discover over the years that there is no problem of the human mind and heart which the bible does not address even people who have been deeply scarred and damaged by the roughest experiences of life can become delighted people i don't mean that we all become effervescent and extrovert if we start off as shy people and quiet people well that's the way god has made us we'll carry on like that but we can still discover the great delight of listening to the words of god's love and truth and coming to understand his ways and his great purpose of rescue and salvation friends if we have a bible in our hands we have in our hands the source of the greatest pleasures and the greatest joys that human beings can know let's bow our heads and we'll pray together in the ways of your testimonies i delight as much as in all riches i will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways i will delight in your statutes i will not forget your word dear god our father we thank you so much that it is because you love us so deeply that you've sent us this great love letter from heaven beginning in genesis and going through to the book of revelation and we do ask you dear father so to be at work in in our hearts and minds changing us and rearranging

the inner landscape of our thinking that we come more and more to delight in your words to treasure them and to rejoice in them that we might indeed be delighted people whatever difficulties and trials we may be facing we ask that you'll help us to find the great pleasures of reading and thinking upon the scriptures and we ask it in jesus name amen