

The Full-Blooded Christian Life

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[0 : 00] Well, we come now to our Bible reading, and you'll find that in the book of Psalms. Psalm 119, that's page 512 of our church Bibles.

And Edward Lobb is starting off a new series in this long but precious Psalm. Psalm 119, that's page 512 of the church Bibles.

Now we shall begin reading at verse 1. Hear the word of the Lord.

Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong but walk in his ways.

You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. Oh, that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes.

[1 : 11] Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments. I will praise you with an upright heart.

When I learn your righteous rules, I will keep your statutes. Do not utterly forsake me. Well, amen.

And may the Lord bless to us this, his word. Well, friends, do let's turn up Psalm 119. And while you're finding that, let me just say again, I think a plug was made for this a week or two ago.

But do let me warmly recommend Willie Phillips' new book, which is called Aspects of Love. Has anybody here read it yet? Raise a hand. That's only about 2% of the congregation.

Willie, he really has put his finger on the pulse with this book. And it's an important and timely book. We are being subjected to a flood of nonsense, wicked nonsense, about sex and marriage these days in society.

[2 : 15] We do need to get back to the proper biblical basis of it. It'll be a great encouragement to you, whether you're younger or older. So do let me encourage you to get hold of that copy. It's not very expensive.

What is it, seven quid, nine quid, something like that. It's worth it. It really is worth it. It'll be a great encouragement. Good. Well, let's bow our heads and we'll pray. God, our Father, your word is truth.

And we're learning to love it because we're learning to love you. And we pray now that as we read your words, they may be joy, strength and encouragement to us.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, let's turn up Psalm 119. I think you've probably got it. Page 512 in our big Bibles.

Now, I'm due to be preaching for six Sunday mornings. This is the first of six. And what I want to do, God willing, is to take the first six sections.

[3 : 18] This great psalm falls into 22 sections. Aleph, Beth, Gimel, and so on, which are the first three letters of the Hebrew alphabet. So 22 sections. And what I'm hoping to do is to take the first six of those sections.

It's an extraordinarily rich piece of writing. And it acts as a kind of encyclopedia of the Christian life. You might say all Christian experience is here.

In fact, the psalm describes Christian experience as a two-way relationship. It's about what God says to his people.

And equally, it's about how his people respond to what he says. And with this being our first morning with the psalm, I want to spend a few minutes introducing the psalm as a whole.

And then we'll have two main sections on the teaching of verses 1 to 8. So let's begin with the opening words, which are intended to arrest us and to force us to prick up our ears.

[4 : 20] Blessed are those whose. I want you to imagine for a moment that two very old men have just died and their funerals have just taken place.

Fred and George have just died. And in the days following their deaths, their friends and acquaintances inevitably discuss them. It's what happens when you die.

You get disgust. Anyway, about Fred, they say, poor old Fred. What a miserable curmudgeon he was. The wind was always in his face.

He used to complain about everything. He complained about the government, about the local council, about the weather, about the price of a pork chop, about his Verrucas, and about his family, who couldn't have been kinder to him.

Fred was a misery. His passing will not be marked by extended lamentations. Now, about George, the talk could not be more different.

[5 : 17] Dear George, what a blessing he was to all of us. The wind was always at his back. He loved people and he loved the Lord. The good effect of his life and example is going to go on for a very long time.

The memory of George will be sweet and lasting. Now, which of those two life summaries would you like people to make about you after you've died?

It's pretty obvious, isn't it? None of us would like to be remembered as a miserable old grumbler. We'd all like to be remembered as being a blessing because we have been blessed.

Now, the whole Bible is about the blessing of God. And his blessing is a great theme in the Psalms and not least in this Psalm 119. The opening words tell us what the Psalm is all about.

It is about the way of blessing. And the way of blessing is open to any person who is willing to listen to the words of this Psalm. How then can we receive and enjoy God's blessing?

[6 : 24] Well, there's only one way according to this Psalm. And it is by hearing what God says to us and then by acting on it, by obeying his voice gladly.

Look at the first two verses here. Blessed are those whose way, which means whose manner of progressing through life, whose conduct, is blameless. Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart.

In other words, we enjoy God's blessing when we learn to walk in his ways, in his instruction, in his law, and to keep his testimonies. The negative implication is that we shall not be blessed if we decide to shun his law and to disregard his testimonies.

Now, the overriding characteristic of this Psalm is that it's about God's words addressed to his people. It's about his words and about how we respond to them.

Therefore, the whole Psalm presupposes a relationship of love and trust between God and his people. Now, as a kind of human parallel, just think for a moment of the way in which our relationships with each other develop.

[7 : 48] How do friendships develop? Well, what happens is that we speak to each other and we listen to each other and then we respond to what the other one is saying. Can you imagine what it would be like at the end of this service if after the final prayer we just sat in our seats in complete silence for half an hour and then departed without saying a word to anybody?

It would be absurd, wouldn't it? What we do at the end of our meetings for half an hour or so is talk to each other 19 to the dozen. Why? So as to encourage each other and to give each other strength.

After all, life is tough. It's full of challenges. So we support each other by talking and listening. And just the same way, Psalm 119 is showing us that the most important voice to listen to is the Lord's voice.

And that is why out of the 176 verses of this psalm, all of them, bar four or five, speak of the Lord's words to us and of our response to them.

The psalmist, as I'm sure you know, uses several different terms for the Lord's words. Here they are working from verse one downwards. First of all, law.

[9 : 07] And the word law doesn't really mean legislation in the way that we think of laws. It means the whole instruction of God. So law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, rules, word in verse nine.

And later in the psalm, for example, at verse 41, you'll find the word promise. But the psalmist uses all these terms interchangeably. In the Hebrew, they all perhaps have slightly different shades of meaning.

But for our purposes, we can quite properly regard them all as meaning the same thing. God's words to us, God's speech to us, which is faithfully recorded for us in the pages of the Bible.

Now, evangelical Christians have sometimes been accused of bibliolatry. In other words, making an idol out of the Bible. As though we worship God's words rather than God himself.

But that is an absurd accusation. To give a parallel. Just imagine that you're sitting down having a long conversation with a good friend.

[10 : 15] Imagine that there are two middle-aged ladies sitting down having a long conversation. And they talk to each other for an hour. Is that possible? Yes, it's possible, isn't it? Now, here is a sample sentence from the conversation.

But, Marjorie, it was a really warm summer's day. It was barbecue weather. But when I got to the supermarket, could I buy a barbecue anywhere? I could not. They'd all been sold.

Can you imagine, my dear, how disappointed I was? Now, as you listen to those words, what you're actually listening to is your friend.

Your words, those words, are your friend expressing herself forcefully to you. Now, I'm speaking to you just now. But you're not just listening to my words.

You're listening to me. It's the same with God. As we listen to his words, we're listening to him. We can't separate him from the things that he says to us. His words convey him to us.

[11 : 13] His will and purpose and love and character. We learn to love and cherish his words because we are learning to love and cherish him. We learn to obey his words and submit to his words because we're learning to obey him and submit to him.

As we listen to his voice and obey his voice, our relationship to him is established and developed. We don't idolize the Bible or worship the Bible.

We worship the Lord. And it's the Bible that enables us to know him and to worship him. If there were no Bible, there could be no knowledge of him. There could be no true worship of him.

So let's not be bamboozled by any talk of bibliolatry. We love the Bible because it brings the Lord to us and it brings us to him. He speaks to us and we respond to him.

And that is how our relationship with him grows in strength and depth. And this is what Psalm 119 is all about. Now here's another introductory point.

[12 : 20] And it's a point about God's great story and our little individual personal story. The Bible is concerned to teach us God's great story.

The great story begins in the book of Genesis and it ends in the book of Revelation. It's the story that runs from the creation to the new creation. And it's all about what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will finally do at the end.

And the main elements of the great story are these. The creation, the rebellion of man, the raising up of Israel, whose great purpose is to provide a savior for the world.

Then that savior comes, the Lord Jesus. And the central action, the most important action of the great story, is all to do with him. His saving death and resurrection and ascension.

Then comes the Holy Spirit and brings about the birth of the Christian church. We then have the history of the church, beginning with the Acts of the Apostles. And then finally, and this of course is still to come from our point of view, we have the return of Christ, the day of judgment, and the issuing in of the new creation.

[13 : 36] That's the great story. But set against the backdrop of the great story is our own little story, the story of our personal individual experience of living the Christian life.

Each of us has our own story, our own tale of highs and lows, of joys and sorrows, and successes and failures. Now, the Bible deals with both the great story and our little stories.

But a psalm like this one is about our little stories. It's about our personal experience of knowing the Lord. It teaches us, in the phrase of verse 3, how to walk in his ways.

Now, Psalm 119 is connected to the great story, as we shall see more clearly in a few minutes. But its central focus is on our actual experience of joy, affliction, delight, perseverance, temptation, and so on.

This psalm is going to help us on the personal level of how to live a full-blooded Christian life. I think you could draw a parallel with the way in which a good novel is written.

[14 : 48] A good novel is a story about the detailed adventures of certain individuals. But their adventures are always set against the backdrop of the great forces which are at work in politics and the social trends of society of the day.

So, for example, a novel by Sir Walter Scott will be about a hero or a heroine and their immediate companions or adversaries. But it will always be set against the social and political upheavals of the day, the Jacobite rebellions or the English Civil War.

And it's those big political and social events which create the tensions and pressures in the lives of the chief figures in the story. Without the big story, the little story would be pap and nonsense, flimsy.

It's the big story that gives power to the little story. And so it is with the Bible. It's the great story of what God has done, is doing, and will finally do that determines the way that we live our lives in 2019.

Well, that's enough wagging on the T. Let's fire off down the first fairway now and we'll look at the first section of this psalm, verses 1 to 8. And I'd like to make two main points which come in the form of two challenges.

[16 : 08] First, this psalm challenges our Western cultural sense of entitlement to freedom. Our Western cultural sense of entitlement to freedom.

Look at how the writer begins. Blessed are those. Well, blessed are who? Blessed are those who walk in the law of the Lord.

Not those who despise the instruction of the Lord. Not those who are lawless. But those who are willing to be limited by the boundaries of God's law.

Those who are willing to curtail their sense of freedom. Verse 2 makes the same point in slightly different words. Blessed are those who keep his testimonies.

The Ten Commandments and everything that's based on them. And who, verse 2, seek him with their whole heart. Those who are determined to keep him in the forefront of their vision.

[17 : 06] So other people may fashion their lives around the search for money or fame or pleasure. But the blessed ones are those who are seeking to know the Lord.

In fact, to know the Lord is the primary goal in their life. Those also, verse 3, who do no wrong but walk in his ways. Now that's a slightly odd phrase, isn't it?

Those who do no wrong. None of us, we know this, none of us is without sin. As John the Apostle says in his first letter, if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.

So what our psalmist means there is that the blessing is for those who are repentant. For those who are setting their face away from sinful ways. And are learning, learning, verse 3, to walk in his ways and not the ways of the world.

And if you look on through the next few verses, you'll see that the same ideas are being worked over again and again in different ways. Those who are blessed are learning, verse 4, to keep God's precepts diligently.

[18 : 10] To walk steadfastly and perseveringly, verse 5, in keeping God's statutes. And so it goes on, fixing our eyes, fixing our focus, verse 6, on his commandments.

Learning his rules, keeping his statutes, as verses 7 and 8 put it. Now if we're learning to live like that, inevitably we are learning to limit our freedom to act in any way that we please.

But our Western cultural history teaches us to prize our freedoms. We sometimes speak of the free West. And we're talking about a freedom there which is both political and intellectual.

Think of political freedom. It has taken centuries for Western democracy to become accepted as the best way of organizing and governing our country.

Now no political system is perfect, but we do know that democracy is a great deal better than tyranny or dictatorship. The great strength of democracy is that if the party in power makes a hash of governing, we the people can vote them out of office after four or five years and give another party the chance to do better.

[19 : 24] And the changeover from one party to the other is made without bloodshed. Political freedom is a precious thing and we rightly prize it. The 20th century has taught us what tyranny can do to a nation.

But equally, we enjoy intellectual freedom in the Western world. Freedom of speech is under threat in the West and we need to lobby for its protection.

We rightly treasure it because it means that we can debate and discuss issues publicly without fear. We value a society where people of very differing views can challenge each other openly.

So, for example, a Christian and a Muslim need to be able to debate the issues of their faiths freely in public without being afraid of getting locked up for expressing their views.

University students need to be able to listen to all manner of speakers at their debating societies. They don't need to have their allegedly sensitive young minds protected from radical teaching, such as the teaching of Bible-believing Christians.

[20 : 34] There needs to be freedom for open, unfettered public debate. Now, we rightly value these political and intellectual freedoms. They've been hard won and they need to be protected.

But the Bible calls the Christian to be not a free thinker, but one whose thinking and behavior is limited, bounded by God's instruction.

Blessed are those, verse 1, who walk in, within the law of the Lord, those who gladly accept his boundaries as the recipe for a happy and fruitful life.

That is the way of blessing. Blessing is not given to those who want to be free of the wholesome restraints of the Bible's teaching. But a sense of entitlement to freedom is somehow written deep into our culture.

In its more modern form, it began to be expressed forcefully in the 1960s. Because by that decade, Britain had more or less recovered from the exhaustion and stress of the Second World War.

[21 : 39] People were beginning to feel better. There was more food about. There wasn't much food about just after the war, but there was by the 60s. There was more money about. Pop singers began to sing of freedom.

I want to be free, which means I intend to be free. Free of the old authority structures. I won't kowtow to the old codes of behavior. I will not defer politely to the royal family or the upper crust.

I'm free to take drugs. I'm free to go to bed with whoever I want to, but without the commitment of marriage and lifelong fidelity. But Psalm 119 teaches us, blessed are those who walk in the law of the Lord, those who walk within his ways.

If you're a Christian university student, you will have noticed the astonishment of some of your non-Christian peers when they realize that you are voluntarily curtailing your behavior according to the Bible.

Why do you submit to the Bible, they say to you? And you reply, because blessed are those who walk in the law of the Lord.

[22 : 49] So this psalm calls on us to renounce any sense of entitlement to live exactly as we please. In any case, those so-called freedoms of the 1960s were not really freedoms at all.

Bob Dylan, in a perceptive song written in the 1980s, sang, You've got to serve somebody. It may be the devil. It may be the Lord. But you've got to serve somebody.

In other words, the idea of personal freedom is just an illusion. If we forsake the ways of the Lord, we will be serving the devil. In the words of a fine old prayer, it's only the Lord whose service is perfect freedom.

In the language of the Apostle Paul, to be a Christian is to be at the same time both free and a bond servant of Jesus Christ. Now, I mentioned earlier that although Psalm 119 is all about our little story, the personal story of how we live our life in response to God's words, it is also intimately related to the great story of the Bible.

So let me just say a little bit about that. These seven or eight words which the psalmist uses to describe God's words, the words law, statutes, precepts, commandments, and so on, these are all words that speak powerfully of the covenant and the law of Moses.

[24 : 15] So they're locking us into the great story. Remember how God gave his laws and commandments to his people at Mount Sinai through Moses. And in giving them his laws, God was saying to his people, this is the way to live.

Live like this and you'll be blessed, you will please me, and you'll be happy. So the giving of the law of Moses was an act of grace and mercy on God's part.

But this raises a tricky question for us, because when we read the Apostle Paul writing to the Romans, he seems to be saying that God's law is a weight around our neck from which we need to be released.

In fact, he says in Romans chapter 6, you're not under law, but under grace. And in chapter 7, he writes, but now we are released from the law.

So we're bound to ask, what is going on here? Psalm 119 is teaching us, especially in verses like verse 14 and verse 16, to delight in God's testimonies and statutes, which suggests that they are delightful, that they're good.

[25 : 25] And yet Paul seems to regard God's law as a grievous burden from which we need to be set free. Well, the answer to this problem is not difficult. In the Bible, God's law has two aspects.

The first aspect is the law that shows us our sin, the law that condemns us. It reveals both the ugly shape of our sinfulness and our abject inability to keep the law.

But the second aspect of it is the law that shows us how to live a God-centered and happy life. And it's the first aspect of the law, the condemning aspect, that Paul teaches us we need to be released from.

He exemplifies what he means in Romans chapter 7. I'll just give a little paraphrase of one section. He says there, Take the tenth of the Ten Commandments, you shall not covet.

He says, I would not have known what it is to covet unless the law had told me not to covet. But when I read that law, it stirred up all my covetous instincts, and I realized that I was condemned by it.

[26 : 33] And furthermore, I realized that the only way I could be freed from the law's condemnation was by putting my faith in the death of Christ, because his death has freed me from the condemnation of the law, because on the cross, he bore the law's penalties for me in my place.

So we who are Christians, we're no longer under the condemning aspect, that first aspect of the law of God. Thank God, he sent the Lord Jesus to die in order to release us from the penalties due to the lawbreaker.

But having been thus released, we are now able to delight in the second aspect of the law, which is the law that shows me how to live well. The law that condemns me is what I need to be released from.

But the law that brings us life and grace and joy, that is the law that we can now begin to walk in. So verse one of our psalm is not teaching us to walk into the jaws of condemnation.

It's teaching us to walk in the way of life and health and godliness. Well now, here's a second challenge from these verses, and that is the challenge to be wholehearted Christians.

[27 : 50] Look at verse two. Blessed are those who seek him with their whole heart. Or verse four. You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.

That means wholeheartedly. Or look on to verse ten. With my whole heart, I seek you. Whole heart. Now friends, does that challenge to be wholehearted make your heart flutter just a little bit?

Well it should. But we're in good company. Because clearly, our psalmist's heart is fluttering as well. It comes across very clearly in the text.

The first four verses there are a full-on, four-square statement of solid truth. They are an assertion that brooks no argument. They are saying, blessed are those who walk in God's law, who seek him wholeheartedly, who walk in his ways, and keep his commandments diligently.

They sound a little bit like the words of a tough army officer as he addresses a troop of ragged new recruits. This is the way things operate around here. Have you got that into your thick skull, private winter bottom?

[29 : 01] Yes, sir. Yes, sir. But just notice how the psalmist responds to his own full-on, four-square assertion. He says in verse five, oh, that my ways may be steadfast.

He's showing us there the fluttering of his own heart. He's acknowledging that he hasn't reached a point in life where he's steadfast thoroughly. The tenses of the verbs reveal his line of thought very clearly.

Verses one to four are all in the present tense. These are great present, perpetually true assertions. Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk, who keep, who seek, who do, who walk.

There's a past tense in verse four, you have commanded, but that's a kind of present past tense. It means the things that have commanded are commanded perpetually. There they are. So these first four verses are all stating factual truth.

This is the way things are. But as soon as you get to verse five, everything shifts into the future tense. He says, oh, that my ways may in the future be steadfast.

[30 : 10] I'm feeling a bit wobbly just now, but I'm hoping for a better future. Then, verse six, I shall not be put to shame. Verse seven, I will praise you with an upright heart when I learn your righteous rules, which I haven't done fully yet.

I'm still on a learning curve, but I know that when I've got your laws firmly in my mind, I will be praising you as I ought. Verse eight, I will keep your statutes, but if I'm to do that, I need your strong right hand to help me, so don't please utterly forsake me.

So do you see how the robust assertions of verses one to four are followed by expressions of weakness and self-doubt in verses five to eight? And that is so encouraging because it mirrors our own experience.

The gospel, the good news, comes at us from the Bible like a flood. Blessing, salvation, joy, peace with God, eternal life.

These are the great realities. But we respond a bit like that man speaking to Jesus, Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief. How then does our fluttering hesitation develop into a strong, bold, wholehearted trust?

[31 : 32] The answer is by continuing to drink in the bold assertions. Our psalmist has told himself what is true in the first four verses.

And in the next 172 verses, he's teaching himself and us how to grasp hold of that truth with his whole heart. Look again at verse seven.

What is the secret of learning to praise God with an upright or whole heart? Well, he learns to do it as he learns God's righteous rules. Continually exposing his heart and mind to the words of God produces a wonderful increase in wholehearted, that is to say, authentic, genuine, unfeigned love and praise.

Let me draw a simple human parallel. Imagine a young couple who are soon to be married. Now, they're thrilled with each other, but they don't know each other terribly well yet.

And in the early days of their marriage, they need to keep reaffirming their wholehearted love for each other. Picture this scenario. One day, the young husband, through sheer laziness and slobbishness, manages to leave both the bathroom and the kitchen in a terrible mess.

[32 : 53] He goes out. And his young wife has to spend half an hour or more clearing everything up and getting the thing back into shape. And when he comes back and she sees him later in the day, she says to him, you are messy and you are thoughtless.

So he cringes somewhat, hangs his head in shame, and he says, I'm sorry, sweetheart, sorry, but do you, do you still, do you still love me? And she says, of course I do, you silly old bat.

So he is listening to her assertions and assurances of continued love and loyalty and her assertion steadies him and helps him to grow in wholehearted love and trust.

And that sort of scenario gets played out many times as their marriage grows. And the repeated assertions of love and fidelity expressed in words that develops wholehearted trust and joy in the marriage relationship.

Now in the same way, as we repeatedly drink in the joyful, full-on assertions that God makes to us throughout the Bible, we learn to worship and serve him with an increasingly whole heart, a heart that is genuine, authentic, and unfeigned.

[34 : 11] In other words, we learn to believe what he says. It's the speaking of God to us that creates in us the response of increasing wholeheartedness in love and trust and service.

And just notice a remarkable feature of this psalm. The psalm is expressed as a prayer, as a prayer from verse 4 onwards. Verses 1, 2, and 3 are expressed as statements, statements to the world.

Blessed are those who. But as soon as the psalmist gets to verse 4, he begins to pray. You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. Oh, that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes.

So in the first three verses, he's addressing the world with these great assertions. But in verses 4 to 176, he is addressing God personally.

Between verse 4 and verse 176, there is only one verse verse 115, which is not addressed to God. Every other verse contains either the word you or the word your.

[35 : 20] It's all spoken to him. And this feature of the psalm teaches us to be wholehearted. It reminds us that Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship.

I speak to him, he speaks to me, he loves me, and that fact causes me to love him. And as I learn to love him because of everything he says to me, inevitably, I learn to love listening to his voice.

And in the end, I shall say, as the psalmist does in verse 97, oh, how I love your law. It is my meditation all the day. In other words, I keep on thinking about it.

It's the source of my joy and confidence and steadiness. In his words throughout the Bible, God is saying to us in a thousand different ways, I love you.

You're mine. When you were alienated from me, when you were under sentence of death because of your sin, I sent Jesus to die for you, to bring forgiveness, and then to be raised up to signal the defeat of the power of death.

[36 : 27] And he is going to return to judge the world righteously, and he will in the end bring you to the very place of my eternal home. We keep on drinking in these glorious instructions and information again and again as we read the Bible.

And over time, over the years and the decades, it transforms us from fluttering uncertainty to a place of peace and security where our hearts dance for joy.

The Pharisees did not understand the law of God. They were legalists. They used to beat people over the head with it. Psalm 119 is the complete antidote to the Pharisaic mindset.

It teaches us to love every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. We learn to love the Lord and we learn to love his words because they bring him to us.

They are the means by which we know him. It's his words that create and sustain and develop our relationship with him.

[37 : 36] Well, let's bow our heads and we'll thank him. Oh, how I love your law.

It is my meditation all the day. How we thank you, dear Heavenly Father, for this man who wrote this psalm and for the way that he learned over time to love your law and to keep on thinking about it because its assertions of your love and commitment to him became something that he was able to grasp hold of more and more deeply and truly and his heart became steady and steadfast.

And we pray for ourselves knowing that our hearts flutter with uncertainty at times. We pray that you'll help us by constantly reading and thinking about, meditating upon these wonderful words and truths of the Bible that our hearts too will grow increasingly steady and be filled with joy and our hands and feet impelled to serve you gladly.

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.