

STUDIES IN THE PSALMS No. 16

Psalm 119

May 2, 2004

We will devote only a few more Sunday evenings to the Psalms, not because there isn't a great deal more to say, but because one must make an end somewhere. But there are several psalms to which I have not paid much attention in the past and richly deserve some comment before we conclude this series. The first of these is the very long, deeply interesting, and wonderfully important Psalm 119. There are some classic studies of this psalm that are lengthy books in their own right, best known among them perhaps that of Charles Bridges, the 19th century Anglican evangelical. As so many other psalms, the 119th has an honored place in the faith and devotion of God's people.

In the midst of political crisis in 1819, William Wilberforce, the man who, more than any other, ended slavery in the British Empire, wrote in his diary, "Walked from Hyde Park Corner repeating the 119th Psalm in great comfort." Henry Martyn, the great missionary to India and Persia often referred to this psalm in his diary: "In the evening grew better by reading the 119th Psalm, which generally brings me into a spiritual frame of mind." It was a favorite of Blaise Pascal who once said of it that "it contained the sum of all the Christian virtues." "He singled out verse 59 as giving the turning point of man's character and destiny:" "I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes." [Ker, *The Psalms in History and Biography*, 144-145]

You all know the 119th as the longest psalm and the longest chapter in the Bible. Psalm 119 is an example of an acrostic psalm. It is one of nine such acrostic psalms in the Psalter (the others being 9-10; 23; 34; 37; 111; 112; 145). In this particular case each section of the psalm has eight verses and each of those verses begins with the same Hebrew letter. The sections are arranged alphabetically, so that all the eight verses of the first section of the psalm begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (א), all the eight verses of the second section begin with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet (ב), and so on through the entire alphabet. There being 22 letters in the alphabet and so 22 sections to the poem, with each section eight verses in length, we arrive at the 176 verses of the psalm. In fact, if you have never seen the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, or wonder how to pronounce each letter, you can find the letters in Hebrew script, each provided with an English name, in almost any English translation of the Bible as the heading of the various sections of Psalm 119. By the way, the name of the Lord, Yahweh, also occurs 22 times in the Psalm. It is hard to believe that those 22 occurrences of the Lord's name are not related to the twenty-two eight verse divisions. [Delitzsch, 243]

As you may remember, every verse of this psalm except 84, 121 and 122 (or only 122; it depends on how vv. 84 and 121 are translated) includes the word "law," in its sense either as law or in its sense as revelation or Holy Scripture, or, if not "law," some synonym: testimony, precept, statute, commandment, ordinance, word, or promise. And what is particularly interesting and important is that there is no discernible progression to the thought of the psalm. Some have argued that it does have such a structure, that it has a specific life-setting and a particular argument. [E.g. Delitzsch] But the arguments for such a structure and progression of thought are strained and have convinced very few. Rather, it seems clear that the psalm does not go

anywhere, starting in one place and finishing in another. Rather what one finds is a number of themes recurring many times. In that lies an important lesson. The psalm is about meditation in the Word of God and the fruits of that meditation as the Word of God is internalized and made the pattern of a man's thoughts. And one does that by constant reading and reflection on the Word of God, the application of it in one's mind to the daily circumstances of life, and constant reflection on its meaning. The psalm, in other words, is an example of what it recommends. *It is a turning over of the Word of God in one's mind over and over again.* Psalm 119 is both a thanksgiving for and celebration of the manifold excellencies of the Word of God *and* an example of how one makes the Word of God his daily companion. In Psalm 119:11 and 15, for example, we read:

"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

"I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways."

Well, that is what the man does *in this psalm*. He meditates on the Word and considers it and hides it in his heart through constant repetition and reflection. As we said in our study of Psalm 1, in Hebrew poetry we can gather a sense of what "meditate" means by noting what words are placed in parallel to it: remember, ponder, calculate, inquire, investigate, and consider. The idea is constantly to relate one's life to the Word of God until we are like John Bunyan, of whom it was said that he was 'bibline: Prick him anywhere and he bleeds the Bible.'" This emphasis indicates that depth is more important than breadth when it comes to the mastery of the Bible. Taking this or that truth of the Word of God into the heart and inscribing it on the heart, applying it over and over again to one's life until one thinks like the Bible thinks and speaks like the Bible speaks – that is *knowing the Word of God* – is more important than knowing even a great deal *about* the Bible.

I think of Andrew Bonar, a man who spent his life meditating on the Word of God. Even in the confusion of old age, the Bible was there, informing his thoughts. "One day, not very long before his death, a [friend] met him in Howard Street, and found that he was quite confused as to where he was. He kindly put him on the right way, and as they parted Dr. Bonar thanked him and said, 'I've just been thinking that I have been like Peter when the angel took him out of prison. Poor man, he did not know where he was.'" [*Diary and Life*, 503] Wouldn't you like to be like that in your old age? Alzheimers but with the Bible firmly fixed in your heart!

Obviously the psalm is too long to read so I am going to take a representative section, vv. 97-104 the 2, "Mem" section. Henry Martyn wrote in his diary, "I experienced a solemn gladness in learning this part, "MEM," of the 119th Psalm." [Ker, 148]

v.97 A salutary reminder for American evangelicals that the law of God and the Old Testament as a whole was never thought an oppressive burden by the devout of the ancient epoch. It was never their view that the Messiah would come to deliver them from God's law. It was his great gift to his people and a means of their great blessing. It was something they wanted to think about all the time.

- v.100 The NT makes the same point in different ways. Jesus said that the Father had granted wisdom to babes and hidden it from the wise and prudent and Paul talks about the wisdom of this world being foolish in comparison to the gospel.
- v.101 Key to the entire philosophy of the Psalm, the interest of the Lord in his Word is not simply to secure understanding on our part, but obedience, a way of life.
- v.102 The Lord is *in* his Word, for it is his own speech, and it is the Lord who works through it in our hearts and lives. There is no separation between the Lord and his Word such as we have sometimes found in the arguments of people who want to dissent from some teaching of the Word of God. The typical move is to open some distance between the Lord himself and his Word, usually by speaking of the Word as a human testimony rather than as divine revelation. We are sometimes accused of “bi bliolatry” for holding to the inerrancy and absolute authority of the Bible, as if we were placing the Bible in God’s place and worshipping it instead of the Lord. But the Bible is God’s speech, what *he* says. In that sense the Bible and God are interchangeable. In fact, we often find the Bible being substituted for God himself as, for example, when Paul says that the Scripture “preached the gospel to Abraham...” (Gal. 3:8) or when the “Scripture said to Pharaoh...” (Rom. 9:17).
- v.103 Once again we are reminded of the love for and the delight in the Word that ought to characterize the believer.
- v.104 And, once again, to know the Word of God aright, really to know it, shapes our convictions. A man who loves the Law of God will hate what is evil and love what is good. From the Bible a believer obtains a true sense of right and wrong and a heart conviction with that sense.

Now there is something very unmodern and un-American in this great psalm. For this is a psalm of quiet reflection, of a man sitting and pondering his life and what the Word of God has to say about it. We are ill-used to the quiet nowadays and ill-used to sitting quietly in deep thought, as did this wise man who wrote this great psalm. We keep serious, reflective thought at bay with the radio, the television, with incessant activity. W.H. Auden, in his famous poem, “September 1, 1939” – as you know, the title refers to the day on which the Second World War began, describes this condition of modern life, a condition that has become only more pronounced since then.

The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furnishings of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

Now Christians perhaps do not fail to meditate for this reason, because they are afraid of what thoughts might come into their mind, what fears they might have to face, what unwelcome conclusions might be forced upon them. Perhaps it is more for us the difficulty of resisting the tide. We live in a rush because this is our culture and we live in noise. I am reminded of this whenever I travel. One cannot find anywhere in an airport where one can escape the sound of a television. There is not even a button on the set so that one could reach up and turn it off if everyone in the area wished for some peace and quiet. One actually begins to wonder if the purpose of the constant noise is to keep people's minds off their fear of flying!

But it is not so in the Bible and magnificently not so here in Psalm 119. It has always been a problem for Christians, of course, to take the time to read and ponder the Word of God, to ponder it with purpose and intention, to write it upon the heart, to reflect on the implications of its teaching for our daily life. Richard Baxter, in his much quieter day, could still write of meditation, "it is confessed to be a duty by all, but practically denied by most... though it is that duty by which all other duties are improved." [*Practical Works*, pb ed. 90-91]

But you do not have to read very widely in the literature of Christian biography and autobiography to learn that great men and women of faith were marked by a penchant to *think and think deeply and often* about what was said in the Word of God. They pondered and considered it, they applied it to themselves, and they gained understanding from it, as did the author of this great psalm.

How many thousands of times will you come upon a passage like this one, from John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*

"At another time, I say by the fire in my house, and was musing on my great wretchedness, and on death as the wages of my sin, when the Lord came and made this word a most precious word to me: 'Forasmuch, then, as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself took part of the same; that, through death, He might destroy him that had the power of death, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.' I thought that the glory of these words was then so weighty on me that I was, both once and twice, ready to [faint] as I sat. Yet not with guilt and trouble, but with solid joy and peace." [In Whyte, *Bunyan Characters*, iii, 237-238]

How often lately have you, have I sat by our fire and mused on our great wretchedness and on death as the wages of our sin? If the answer is, as I fear, that we have not lately done that, perhaps now we know what the Lord has not come and made one of those statements about salvation through God's grace and Christ's redemption as we often find in the Bible so precious to us that we nearly fainted for the joy of it all!

Now the point of all of this is what Pascal so famously said.

'From his deepest foundations upwards man is made to think. His whole manhood, his whole duty to God and to man, is simply to think about God and about man and about himself as he ought to think. That is the whole

obligation and merit and dignity of man.” [As rendered by Alexander Whyte, *Thomas Shepard*, 164]

And that is what the Bible says in very many different ways: “As a man thinks, so he is.” We take that to mean that a man’s life will be shaped by his convictions. But there is more to it than that. A man’s life is directed by his thought -life, his thoughts and thinking determine how powerfully his convictions will bear on his living; how often, how seriously, how well, how deeply he thinks about something will determine how much that something will impress itself on his heart and his will. Thinking is the mother of living, and Christian thinking is the mother of Christian living. Christian thinking, pondering, considering is the engine of Christian living.

Or, as Charles Simeon put it:

‘Meditation is the grand means of our growth in grace; without it, prayer itself is an empty service. You often feel that your prayers scarcely reach the ceiling; but oh, get into this humble spirit by considering how good the Lord is, and how evil you all are, and then prayer will mount on wings of faith to heaven. The sigh, the groan of a broken heart, will soon go through the ceiling up to heaven, aye, into the very [heart] of God.’ [In Moule, *Charles Simeon*, 137-138]

This is a key insight that you will find in many of the classic works of Christian devotion and sanctification. For example, in Henry Scougal’s masterpiece, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, written in 1671 – a book, by the way, of which George Whitefield said, ‘I never knew what true religion was till God sent me this excellent treatise (and, no wonder, Scougal was an Aberdeen grad!) – this point is made emphatically and specifically. Scougal has a chapter entitled “Consideration a Great Instrument of Religion.” And in it he talks of meditation as a means for ‘begetting [a] holy and divine temper of spirit...’

‘Men are..seldom at..pains to consider the evidences of those truths, or to ponder the importance and tendency of them; and thence it is that they have so little influence on their affections and practice. Those ‘spiritless and paralytic thoughts,’ as one doth rightly term them, are not able to move the will, and direct the hand. We must therefore endeavor to work up our minds to a serious belief and full persuasion of divine truths, unto a sense and feeling of spiritual things: our thoughts must dwell upon them, till we be both convinced of them, and deeply affected with them. Let us urge forward our spirits, and make them approach the invisible world, and fix our minds upon immaterial things, till we clearly perceive that these are no dreams; nay, that all things are dreams and shadows beside them.’ [114-115]

And then there follows in that great book a recommendation of subjects that Christians should think seriously about until their thinking has begotten a lively faith: God’s nature; God’s love, man’s nature; the joys of heaven; our own sins; etc. [117]

I think most of us would agree this evening that Psalm 119 uncovers a real weakness in our Christian living, a weakness in the foundation of our Christian living. We do not *think, often,*

hard, carefully, reflectively, intentionally about what God has told us in his Word, about what it means for our living each day, about what it means both to believe this truth and to practice and obey it. And the result is that we do not glory in the truth and love it as we should and it is not the power in our lives that we want it to be and know it ought to be. Time and time again the Bible lays this obligation *to think*, to ponder upon us and here in the long psalm it reminds us of what blessings will be ours if we meditate faithfully and often on the Word of God.

We may be tempted to think, well I *read* the Bible, and I *pray*. But Augustine, Bernard and many other experts on the godly life remind us *that reading without meditation*, without careful pondering of what we have read, without turning its meaning over in our minds and applying it to our lives *is arid or dry* and that *prayer without meditation is cold and formal*. They would say, “They usually thrive best who meditate most.” [Brooks, *Works*, i, 291] And the reason is that God has created us in such a way that thinking is the mother and the engine of conviction and feeling. The way to feeling the force of truth is to think the truth through, to argue it to one’s own heart, to ponder what it means and to search out its importance. God has gone to very great lengths to give us the Bible. The least we can do is to think often and carefully about what he has said to us in the Bible.

Think of other things in your life that prove this point very simply. Some of you men know full well you feel far too deeply about the fortunes of your favorite team, the Mariners or the Sonics or the Seahawks or the like. Why? Why should it matter so much to you? You know full well that the outcome of a game or a season is of no real consequence. Why do things of such little importance weigh so on you? Well, I will tell you. It is as simple as this and I’ll bet your own experience has proved it to you. The reason such things weigh so with you is because you think about them so much. If you get away and stop thinking about them because you think about other things, the interest begins to fade, to weaken, even to die. It is like someone who watches way too much TV but then goes to someplace interesting where there is no TV and suddenly discovers that he hasn’t missed it at all! It is the thinking about it that keeps it a live issue and a matter of real importance to you. Stop thinking about it and it withers in your heart. The same is true of many sins. Greed is fed by thinking, so is lust, so is envy, so is hatred. Stop thinking about certain things and certain people and those temptations lose their power. It is the nature of our fallenness and of sin that we find ourselves so inclined to think compulsively about the wrong things and think only lightly and insubstantially and infrequently about the right things. Thinking about things is what gives them power in us and over us.

And the same is true of the Word of God and the truth it contains. The more you think about it and the more seriously, the greater, the more wonderful, the more all-consuming, the more practically important it becomes. That is the power of thinking. God gave us this power and made the use of it a great means of everything holy in our lives. When we read in Proverbs 4:23 that above all else we are to guard the heart, for out of it flow the issues of life, we understand that by ‘heart’ is there certainly if not entirely meant the organ of thought. “As the heart *thinks...*” we read. More often than the organ of feeling, in the Bible the heart is the organ of thought, attention, reflection, memory, and understanding. It is used this way 204x in the OT. And how is the heart guarded? By putting it to work thinking about and reflecting on the Word of God.

As the author of Psalm 119 put it in his v. 11: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” That is what you and I are to be doing all the time – putting the Word of God in our hearts – and we do that by thinking about it, considering it, mulling it over, reflecting on what it means for us. And what every wise Christian promises us is that if we do that and to the extent we do that, we shall have more of the glorious force and power of that Word in our lives.

When the Reformation reached a crisis in Germany at the Diet of Augsburg, Veit Dietrich, a post-graduate student who was in Luther’s entourage, wrote to Philip Melanchthon concerning what he observed of Luther at that critical time: “He strengthens himself each day in his convictions by a constant application to the Word of God.” [In I. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*, 154] Well that is what you and I must do and that is the best way, perhaps the only way, to do it!

Do you want to know precisely how? What to think about? What to consider? What subjects to ponder and plumb and apply?

In *The Holy War* Bunyan has a character named Mr. Meditation. And he was a perfect hero of thinking over and through the Word of God and what it teaches and especially its greatest subjects, those that bear most mightily on any Christian’s life. According to Alexander Whyte’s imaginative retelling, after Mr. Meditation died, a piece of paper was found among his things on which he had written his course or schedule for meditation.

“Monday, death; Tuesday, judgment; Wednesday, heaven; Thursday, hell;
Friday, my past life back to my youth; Saturday, the passion of my Savior; the
Lord’s Day, creation, salvation, and my own.” [*Bunyan Characters*, iii, 219]

You have only to be a Christian to know how much better a Christian you would become and how much more devout and faithful a life you would live if only you thought more often, more carefully, and more intentionally about those matters. *That is the summons of the 119th Psalm.* The Word of God deserves to be meditated upon and thought about, all the time, and over and over again. And the man or woman, boy or girl, who does that will not long remain the same person! Such is the Word of God and such the love we ought to have for it and the delight we ought to have in it.

Think of it carefully,
Study it prayerfully,
Deep in your heart
Let its oracles dwell.
Ponder its mystery,
Slight not its history,
For none ever loved it
Too fondly or well.