

Psalm 119:137-144 Sunday 2nd November 2025

Psalm 119 is notable for being the longest psalm and the longest chapter in the Bible. It takes about 25 minutes to read. It is made up of 22 sections each of which consist of 8 verses. 176 verses in total. Apart from the last section, the other 21 sections have a similar structure and a similar theme. 174 of the 176 verses mention God's word. Sometimes God's word is referred to as his law, precepts, statutes, commands, decrees, promises or word. But whichever term is used the same meaning is implied.

For the psalmist God's word, the Law were the first 5 books of the Old Testament, the Torah. It was considered to be divine instruction given by God to Moses. Its observance was seen as the basis of the covenant between God and Israel. It formed the foundation of their distinct cultural and religious identity.

The overarching theme of psalm 119 is the value and importance of God's Word, and the psalmist's deep devotion to it. The psalmist EXPRESSES a deep reverence for God's laws, highlighting their significance in guiding his life and bringing about spiritual growth and enlightenment.

WHO IS THE PSALMIST?

We are not certain who wrote the psalm. If we go back to v9 we find the psalmist poses the question, *How can a young man keep his way pure?* And his answer is *by living according to your word*. Perhaps the question is purely rhetorical, or perhaps he is thinking of himself when he was a young man, or perhaps he still is a young man

Modern scholars think that the writer may have been in Exile in Babylon. The Word of God was central to the religious life of the Jews when in Exile. With the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple they were no longer able to offer sacrifices to express their devotion and make atonement.

There **are** things that we know for sure about the psalmist. We know that he is a person who earnestly wished to know and obey the lord. For in v10 we read, *I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands*.

The psalm is both a song and a prayer. It is a prayer in as much as the psalmist is speaking directly to God. The whole of the psalm reflects the devotion of the writer. He is passionate, he is earnest, he is forthright.

HE PROCLAIMS THE NATURE OF GOD.

Listen to what he says about the nature of God

In v 64 he proclaims, *The earth is filled with your love, O Lord; teach me your decrees.,*

v68 You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees.

V73 Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands.

v156 Your compassion is great, O Lord; preserve my life according to your laws.

V142 Your righteousness is everlasting and your law is truth.

And in V137 Righteous are you O Lord and your laws are right

When he calls God righteous, he means God is morally perfect, just and truthful in all his being and his ways. God's very essence is righteous and so it follows that his laws should also be righteous. His laws are consistent with his character. Some translations of v137 read *Righteous are you O Lord, and YOUR JUDGEMENTS are right/just/fair*, so we understand that God's laws, which the NIV calls "right", are right in the sense that they are just and fair.

Society's laws are generally here to help us live an ordered life. Good laws are designed to protect us from harm, particularly when we are young and more inclined to act without thinking. Sometimes we are inclined to think that laws restrict us from enjoying life to the full, but the psalmist does not consider this to be the case with God's laws.

HE PROCLAIMS THE BENEFITS OF THE LAW

In v1 the psalmist proclaims that those *who walk according to the law of the Lord* as BLESSED.

In v14 *I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.*

In v24 *Your statutes are my delight; they are my counsellors.*

In v45 *I will walk about in freedom for I have sought out your precepts.*

In V52 *I remember your ancient laws, O Lord, and I find comfort in them.*

In v93 *I will never forget your precepts for by them you have preserved my life.*

In v111 *Your statutes are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.*

So the psalmist finds the commands of God to be a wonderful blessing, bringing joy, delight, freedom, comfort, preservation.

From the gospels we can get the impression that the Law appears to get a bad rap as Jesus was very critical of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who were devoted followers of the Law. But by Jesus day the Jewish understanding of the Law had broadened. It had grown to not just be the Torah but also to include oral traditions and teachings, and the words of the prophets. But of these three components, the written Law, the Torah, still took precedence. Jesus was heavily critical of the hypocrisy of the teachers of the Law. He challenged those oral teachings that compromised the purity of the Law and explained that they weren't God's intention. He was critical of the religious authorities' failure to prioritise the essentials of the Law.

Jesus taught that he came to fulfill the Law and the words of the prophets not to destroy them. By this he meant to bring the Law to its intended completion and full meaning. This involved both his perfect obedience to the law in his life and his sacrificial death. His death fulfilled the ceremonial and sacrificial aspects of the law. He also fulfilled the Law by correctly interpreting its true spiritual meaning. He went beyond a simple external observance of the law to emphasize its deep spiritual intent which focused on the heart. And he summarized the entire law by stating that the greatest commandments are to love God and to love your neighbour which he taught were the true core of the Law.

He reveals his DEVOTION TO THE LAW

We can't help but feel humbled by the amount of time the psalmist spent studying God's precepts. V62 tells us that *At midnight I rise to give you thanks for your righteous laws.*

V148 tells us *My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.*

v164 tells us *Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws.*

And in v 97 *O how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.*

So the psalmist prefers to devote the whole of his day to meditating on God's Law while breaking his sleep at night to think about it. His devotion to God's word sets the bar high for the rest of us.

Some of us may spend time in prayer and Bible Reading each day using With Love to the World or Read the Bible in Two Years. Some of us may use both. People of an Anglican background may use the Daily Offices. They are a set of daily prayer services designed to turn our thoughts at regular intervals through the day to the things of God. They consist of 4 services which guide individuals and communities through scripture readings, prayers and worship throughout the day. When these disciplines are practised with the same love of God's word that the psalmist had, then they can be a wonderful aid to helping us spend time with God.

The psalmist tells us in V11 *I have hidden your word in my heart* so he has committed to memory God's word.

And in v15 *I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.*

He tells us at least three more times in v27, v48, v 78 that he meditates, so taking the time to reflect on God's promises is central to the psalmist's understanding.

In v130 he says *the unfolding of your words gives light, it gives understanding to the simple.* If we think of the bud of a rose gradually unfolding its petals to come into full bloom then we get some idea of what he is trying to convey by the word "unfolding." A rose takes time to reveal its full beauty, and it takes time for God's words to reveal their whole truth and relevance. One of the worst enemies of us hearing God speak in scripture is to hasten our quiet times. Another enemy is weariness. If we are unprepared to devote the time to God's word that the psalmist did, then we at least need to set aside quality time to reflect and meditate on God's word.

PSALMIST IS STEADFAST IN HIS DEVOTION TO GOD'S WORD

Verse 139 from today's reading, reveals that the psalmist's devotion to the teachings of God takes a toll on his well-being. The NIV translates the verse as *My zeal wears me out, for my enemies ignore your words.* It is as though his level of exasperation at his enemies' neglect of God's word is such that it has brought him to a state of exhaustion.

V139 and v141, *Though I am lowly and despised, I do not forget your precepts,* make us aware that he is not liked by everyone and there are people who he counts as enemies.

Prime among his enemies are the **arrogant**-people who fail to acknowledge the value of God's word either through ignorance or neglect. They trust in their own righteousness or the righteousness of another. By their attitudes, words or actions they show scorn for God's word. The psalmist is faced with their contempt and their lies: v21-23 *You rebuke the arrogant, who are cursed and who stray from your commands. Remove from me scorn and contempt for I keep your statutes. Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees.*

V69 Thought the arrogant have smeared me with lies I keep your precepts with all my heart. And also in v51 and V85

As we read on we find the psalmist is concerned by more than just what they say about him. He is concerned about what they may do to him.

V95 The wicked are waiting to destroy me but I will ponder your statutes.

V110 The wicked have set a snare for me but I have not strayed from your precepts.

V161 Rulers persecute me without cause but my heart trembles at your word

The dedication of the psalmist to the things of God have not paved an easy path for him. It appears that much of the opposition he experienced is a direct result of his faithfulness to the Word of the Lord. It is distressing to know that he was despised, belittled and persecuted for his beliefs and that this occurred over 2500 years ago. It is not all that different to what people experience today. Yet in every situation he clung to God's word for comfort, strength, wisdom and truth.

Although Psalm 119 is highly structured the psalmist's passion and the devotion to the Lord and to His Law is overwhelming. The psalmist shared all that was on his heart with the Lord.

GOD'S WORD TODAY

Today we have so much more than the psalmist. The psalmist understood God's word, God's Law through the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible.

Today, we know God's Law through his Son and through the whole of the Bible.

Firstly, the gospel of John identifies Jesus as the Word. In a few sentences we learn the Word was God and was with God from the beginning, and through him all things were created. As the word became flesh, God came to earth as the man Jesus, the fulfilment of God's truth and love. Jesus is the personification of God's Word.

Secondly, we know the Bible as the written Word of God. It has as its core message the good news of salvation and redemption found in Jesus. In the New Testament the Bible includes the teaching of Jesus about the coming of God's kingdom as well as the writings and activities of the early church. In the Old Testament, the Bible contains the history books, the wisdom writings, the prophecies and God's Law, the Torah. We interpret the Old Testament through the lens of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We interpret the Torah through the teachings of Jesus.

So we are blessed by having a much fuller revelation of God's word than the psalmist. When the psalmist says in v144a *Your statutes are forever right*, we can agree with him. However, our understanding of "right" or "just" or "fair" or "true" is seen through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When the psalmist says in v144b, *give me understanding that I may live*, he pleads for divine wisdom and understanding so that he can comprehend God's word, for it is the way to live life as it should be lived. And like him we seek to live life as it should be lived. The teachings of scripture, the revelation of God through Jesus in the gospels show us how to live life as it should be lived. May we recognise that the Word of God is right. And pray "Give us understanding that we may live".