

WHAT WE WANT FROM THE WORD
PSALM 119:129-136

What did you want this week? That's a fitting question for a week when there is much gift giving.

- ✓ What gifts were you anticipating giving?
- ✓ What kinds of gifts were you hoping to receive (or not receive)?
- ✓ Where did you want to go (or not go)?
- ✓ What did you want to eat (or not eat)?
- ✓ With whom did you want to spend time — who did you want to see (or not see)?



“What do you want?” is also an appropriate question to ask about Scripture. What do you want from this book you hold in your hand? What do you expect it to do for you?

The first Sunday after Christmas every year, our worship is focused on Scripture. And that is true again this Sunday, as we come again to Psalm 119. This Psalm is a familiar passage that affirms the effectiveness of the Word of God. It is an extended acrostic, organized around the Hebrew alphabet; each line of the 22 stanzas begins with the successive letter of the alphabet. Twice a year we look at one of those stanzas to remind us of the priority of God's Word. Today we are looking at the stanza that begins with the letter *Pē* (פּ, vv. 129-136). In these verses, the psalmist speaks of some of the characteristics of the Scriptures and then makes a series of requests of God in light of those characteristics. We find ourselves compelled to do what the psalmist does —

PRAY FOR GOD'S WORD TO WORK IN YOUR LIFE (AND LET IT DO WHAT IT DOES).

Let's see what the psalmist says about Scripture...

1. Since God's Word is What it is... (vv. 129-131)

- ✓ God's Word is a **WONDER** (v. 129)
- ✓ God's Word is **ILLUMINATING** (v. 130)
- ✓ God's Word is **SATISFYING** (v. 131)

2. ...Pray for God's Word to Do What it Does (vv. 132-135)

- ✓ Pray for **GRACE** (v. 132)
- ✓ Pray for **FREEDOM** (v. 133)
- ✓ Pray for **OBEDIENCE** (v. 134)
- ✓ Pray for **BLESSING** (v. 135a)
- ✓ Pray for **INSTRUCTION** (v. 135b)

3. (And **GRIEVE For Those Who Do Not Do What the Word Commands) (v. 136)**

1. Since God's Word is What it is... (vv. 129-131)

• God's Word is a WONDER (v. 129)

- ✓ Throughout this psalm, the writer uses a variety of words to refer to Scripture, though he focuses on eight particular words, and most of those words usually appear at least once in each stanza.
- ✓ There are nuances of meaning between the various words; generally, he is using different words for the sake of variety, which is how we will mostly see these words in this stanza..
- ✓ The first word he uses in this stanza is **testimonies** — the “witnesses.” These are legal documents and decrees, generally referring to Mosaic Law. These legal statements demand obedience (v. 59).
- ✓ What the psalmist says about these testimonies is that they are **wonderful**.
 - This word appears only 13x in the OT, and with one exception it always refers to God or something that God does (e.g., Ps. 78:12; 89:5). The general sense is that it is something unusual, out of the ordinary, or even miraculous.
 - The word is used rarely — it is notable that it is used of the coming Messiah (Is. 9:6; He is “wonderful counselor”). Scripture is wonderful in similar ways to the wonder of Messiah.
 - To say that God's testimonies are **wonderful** is to say that are extraordinary and surpassing. They are unique. They are law and compel obedience, but differently than any other document.
 - How is God's Word unique/wonderful? Listen to Spurgeon —

“[God's testimonies are] full of *wonderful* revelations, commands and promises. *Wonderful* in their nature, as being free from all error, and bearing within themselves overwhelming self-evidence of their truth; *wonderful* in their effects as instructing, elevating, strengthening, and comforting the soul. Jesus the eternal Word is called *Wonderful*, and all the uttered words of God are *wonderful* in their degree. Those who know them best *wonder* at them most. It is *wonderful* that God should have borne testimony at all to sinful men, and more *wonderful* still that his testimony should be of such a character, so clear, so full, so gracious, so mighty.”
[*Treasury of David*, 3: 378; my emphasis.]

- ✓ Because they are testimonies and because they are wonderful, the psalmist **observes them**.
 - Since the Word is wonderful, it can't be ignored. It can't be disregarded. One can't be complacent or indifferent to it. One must do something with it.
 - On Christmas Eve, a new tradition we have is to buy a book we have enjoyed and think that others also might enjoy; we wrap them without any names and choose them like a white elephant gift, with the intention of reading it later that night and into the new year. If the book we give isn't received with excitement, it's a disappointment, because it meant so much to us.
 - Of all books, only Scripture is a **wonder**, so it must be embraced in an appropriate way.
 - The psalmist says he will **observe** the testimonies; he will obey (vv. 2, 22, 33, 34, 56, 69, 100...).

- You can't be ambivalent about the Word; it demands obedience and that obedience is good.
- So the psalmist says he also will observe it with/by *my soul*. He is obeying genuinely, not superficially (something both we and the Israelites had a problem doing, **Amos 5:21-24**).
- He delights to obey; he delights to comply with God's Word. It may come with a cost (almost certainly); the benefit always outweighs the cost. You will never (ultimately) regret obeying God.

- God's Word is **ILLUMINATING** (v. 130)

- ✓ God's Word also *gives light*. It reveals and it illuminates; it is similar to **v. 105**; **Ps. 19:8**.
- ✓ The word *unfolding* could be translated "opening" or "entrance." It is a picturesque image; think about living in a tent made of animal skin — it would be dark apart from any candles. Only when the doorway was opened would there be light to see where to go. That's what the psalmist says Scripture does; it illuminates our way. So, one translation, "Your instructions are a doorway through which light shines" (Christian Standard Bible [CSB]). This is God's "incandescent intervention" dispelling "innate darkness and lingering shadows." [Zemek]
- ✓ What is the light of Scripture? It gives clarity and comfort in our confusion, it gives perspective for our problems, it gives right ways for wrong desires, it gives hope for the helpless, it gives strength for the struggling, and it gives instruction for our ignorance.
- ✓ This illumination is not just helpful; it's powerful — *it gives understanding to the simple*.
 - The word *simple* refers to someone who is not yet trained. This is *not* the fool of Proverbs who is rebellious against the truth. The simple person is the naïve person; he just doesn't know.
 - For the inexperienced person, Scripture gives understanding and wisdom. It gives direction.
 - Scripture transforms the simple person to someone who is astute (**Ps. 19:7**; **116:6**).
 - Luther "argued that the wisdom of the Bible is hidden from those who are wise in their own eyes but disclosed to those who are 'ready, prepared, eager always to be taught, judged, and to hear, rather than to teach, judge and be heard.'" [Boice]
- ✓ I can't read this verse without thinking about one of the founding members of this church, Muriel Clifton who loved to quote this verse and then say, "And I'm simple..." Aren't we all? There is no one who is wise on his own. Without Scripture, we would all be living in darkness. That's what was compelling about Muriel's life, because as often as I visited her, I don't think I ever read a Scripture to her that I didn't see her immediately start to nod her head and then finish by quoting it for me. That Word of God sustained her for her 97 years; it gave her (and the psalmist and us) direction.
- ✓ The Bible gives understanding, but to give understanding, it must be taken in — "You'll never know what the Word can do if you don't study and apply it. It isn't enough simply to say you believe it. It must occupy an exalted place in your life. Since God Himself exalts it and magnifies it (Ps. 138:23), how much more should we?" [MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, 100.]
- ✓ If we're simple (and we are), can we make a commitment to increase our intake of God's Word?

• God's Word is **SATISFYING** (v. 131)

- ✓ We should take in the Word because it's right — but it is also satisfying, which is why Luther said:

“For some years now I have read through the Bible twice every year. If you picture the Bible to be a mighty tree and every word a little branch, I have shaken every one of these branches because I wanted to know what it was and what it meant.”

- ✓ The psalmist uses three words to indicate his desire for Scripture — ***opened...panted...longed***.
 - He opened his mouth to “eat” Scripture because he was panting for it — hungering for it.
 - A few weeks ago, I pulled our car into the garage late one afternoon and before I turned off the ignition to the car, I could smell dinner (with the windows rolled up!). Immediately, I began salivating; Raye Jeanne had been simmering a soup all afternoon, and the smell permeated the entire house and garage (a good thing!). I walked in the door and said, “Let’s eat!” The smell of the food stimulated my taste buds and I *wanted to eat*. *Now!* That’s this kind of longing.
 - Do you also recognize that to long for Scripture is to long for God? **Psalm 42:1-2** uses the same language about having a desire for God. To want Scripture is to want God who is revealed in this Word; and to want God is to want the Scriptures.
- ✓ Why does the psalmist use this “longing” language? Because the goal isn’t just to desire God’s Word — the goal is that our desires are filled up by God and we get satisfied. The goal is not salivation. The goal is satisfaction. The goal isn’t reading a menu; the goal is eating — and being filled.
 - Raye Jeanne and I spent virtually our entire dating life more than 1000 miles apart. From the day we met until the day we were married, 13 months later, we spent less than one month in the same location. So we depended on phone calls and mail. And when I received a letter, I read it over and over; and when I sent a letter, I worked to communicate creatively and clearly.
 - Why such care with our letters? Because we wanted to know each other. The goal wasn’t the letter — the goal was to get to know the author of the letter. And Scripture operates in the same way to get us to God. Only it will satisfy us, because only the author is satisfying.
- ✓ Because the Word is satisfying, John Rogers, one of the martyrs under Queen Mary, said, “Lord, whatever thou dost to us, take not thy Bible from us; kill our children, burn our houses, destroy our goods, only spare us thy Bible; take not away thy Bible.” [in *A Quest for Godliness*, 47.] If the Bible is removed, then our means of knowing God is removed. We know who He is and what He says by this book.
- ✓ So, is the Bible satisfying to you and me? Do we long to know it in that way? If not, it could be because we haven’t tasted of the fulness of its goodness. Start reading, meditating, contemplating, memorizing, and praying the Word, and see if your taste buds might acclimate to this Word.

2. ...Pray for God's Word to Do What it Does (vv. 132-135)

- This psalm contains many kinds of commitments because of the power of Scripture: be in awe, believe, cling to, consider, delight in, hate false ways, meditate on, remember, speak, give thanks,...
- But one of the other kinds of responses is to make requests of God, something he does multiple times in the final part of this stanza. Those requests function as prayer requests; while they have the form of imperatives, they function as requests — “would you act in this way for me?” His “panting gives way to his pursuit of privileges...” [Zemek] What are the requests?

• Pray for GRACE (v. 132)

- ✓ When the psalmist asks God to **turn to me...and be gracious**, he uses a broad term for grace.
- ✓ The request is “Would you look at me and move toward me?” That is an affirmation that the psalmist cannot move toward God on his own and he cannot compel God to move toward him. He needs God. “As sinners we need this favour. As believers, we *entreat* it in...assurance...” [Bridges]
- ✓ Why can the psalmist be bold to ask God for grace? Because that’s what He does for **those who love Your name**. Notice that he says **after Your manner** — this is God’s “judgment” (one of the words for Scripture). This is “God’s decision as judge” [Ash]; the Word has revealed to us how God will act, and that is what He will do. And what He does is He is gracious to those who love Him — which simply is a reference to God’s loyal followers — believers in God (Ps. 69:36).
- ✓ One commentator says, “Isn’t [this] lovely? With those who love his name, his revealed name, given in his word, that is, who love him, it is his way, his judgment, his sovereign decision, to turn and be gracious. First, he turns us to him with the gift of repentance. And then he turns to us and smiles his grace. And he shows that grace by pouring his life-changing word into our open panting mouths. How we need that!” [Ash]
- ✓ And just one last note about this — it’s appropriate, right, good, and wise to ask for grace. He wants us to come to Him as a loving Father and ask for help (Mt. 7:7ff). He won’t turn us away.

• Pray for FREEDOM (v. 133)

- ✓ When the psalmist asks God to **establish my footsteps...** he is asking to be made firm and steady. He wants his feet (a figure for his life and what he does) to be rooted in God’s Word. He wants to be committed to the Word of God and he wants to live life according to God’s Word (cf. Ps. 1:3).
- ✓ In particular, he doesn’t want sin to have dominion/lordship/sovereignty over him. He doesn’t want to be controlled and ruled by sin, which is always a temptation (cf. Cain, Gen. 4:6). We are surrounded by temptations for covetousness, lust, worry, defensiveness, anger...
- ✓ When faced with temptation, we need this prayer — “steady my steps; make me rooted in You.”
- ✓ This prayer is needful because of the general nature of sin: its enslaving, a terrible task master.

- ✓ All sin comes from our enemy, Satan, who seeks our destruction not our joy (1 Pt. 5:8). And the power of sin is death — Satan’s WMD (Weapon of Mass Destruction). Sin only takes and never brings life. Sin will never leave you ultimately happy.
- ✓ But the one who is in Christ is freed from sin’s bondage (Jn. 8:34-36; Rom. 5:18, 21; 6:14, 17-18).
- ✓ When the enticement of the flesh pulls you toward sin, you can fight and resist and you don’t have to sin; the first step in mortifying sin is to pray. “Lord, help me, I don’t want to fail...” (Mt. 6:13)

- Pray for **OBEDIENCE** (v. 134)

- ✓ The request to be **redeemed** is a common OT request — it is a desire for deliverance from dangers generically, or from human oppression specifically (as here).
- ✓ The suffering of the psalmist is genuine and it is something he has referred to many times in the psalm (vv. 22, 50-51, 85-87, 92, 95, 107, 110, 115, 121-122).
- ✓ What is notable in this request is that he wants deliverance so **that** he can **keep [God’s] precepts**.
- ✓ To “keep” God’s Word is to be attentive to it and attend it; he protects it (like a guard of a gate).
- ✓ Whenever a believer is persecuted and oppressed there are multiple temptations that will keep him from obeying God: he will be tempted to fear, anger, maliciousness, discouragement/despair, wandering and rebelling against God (forsaking Him), and misusing words.
- ✓ The psalmist wants to obey and recognizes that suffering brings particular temptations to wandering from God; so he asks for deliverance, not for an easier life, but for a more faithful life.

- Pray for **BLESSING** (v. 135a)

- ✓ The opening line of v. 135 is a general request for grace (cf. Aaronic benediction, Num. 6:22-27).
- ✓ Notice that the word **shine** is the same word as **light** (v. 130). If God is gracious to him (v. 135a), then he will find in the teaching of God’s Word (v. 135b) illumination/direction for life (v. 130).
- ✓ In calling himself a **servant**, he also is affirming his submission to and dependence on God.
- ✓ He needs God’s grace and favor if he will survive and thrive in life.
- ✓ He especially wants the blessing of instruction that will lead him to obedience...

- Pray for **INSTRUCTION** (v. 135b)

- ✓ Notice the connection between the lines in vv. 135 — he wants grace and he wants to be **taught** the **statutes** of God. He wants to be taught the binding and permanent Word of God so that He can learn it and obey it. This is a frequent theme in the psalm (vv. 26-27, 33, 68-69, 117-118).
- ✓ The psalmist wants grace — but he doesn’t want it for self-indulgent pleasures and ease. He wants the grace of instruction (however it comes) so that he will **really** learn Scripture’s value and power.
- ✓ We typically want grace so we can avoid problems; the psalmist wants grace so he can grow in the knowledge of God (cf. 2 Pt. 3:18). (So pray for problems so we can grow in grace?)

3. (And **GRIEVE** For Those Who Do Not Do What the Word Commands) (v. 136)

- Who are the people who **do not keep Your law**? (Who is **they**?) The closest antecedent is those who oppress him (v. 134). I think he is talking about his enemies, who are also enemies of God.
- And for those enemies, he **sheds streams of water** — an obvious figure for weeping/grief. He is broken-hearted for them — he has “abundant sorrow for abounding sin.” [Scroggie]
- He grieves **because they do not keep Your law**. They are disobedient and rebellious (contra v. 134).
 - ✓ They have broken the law — the reference is beyond the Mosaic law to all the revealed Word of God (the OT). And to not keep the law in even one place makes them guilty of all (Js. 2:10).
 - ✓ Are we stirred up when we see their blindness (Acts 17:16). Are we inwardly anguished when we see widespread unbelief (Rom. 9:1-4)? Or are we cold and dispassionate about their sin?
 - ✓ He laments the proliferation of sin and the bondage of those who are in sin. “The sins of sinners are the sorrows of saints.” [Matthew Henry]
- It’s easy (and tempting) to be self-righteously angry when we see ungodly people sin. What do we expect them to do? They can do nothing other than what they are doing. Yes, they could respond to their conscience and there is common grace that has provided common morality, but they are ensnared by sin, shackled by sin, imprisoned in sin. That’s what our condition was like until our chains fell off by the grace of God.
- Instead of being angry, can we have compassion and pity for these people? Can we weep for them (Lk. 19:41; Jn. 11:35)? And from our tears can we share the reason for the hope that is within us?

“Tears show compassion, and compassion wins others far more effectively than belligerent arguments and certainly more effectively than anger. Do we weep for others, sorrowing over the pain we know their unbelief and disobedience bring?” [Boice, 1043-4.]

CONCLUSION: Pray through the Psalm...

BENEDICTION: Numbers 6:24-26