

THE RIGHTEOUS GOD'S RIGHTEOUS WORD
PSALM 119:137-144

Puritan John Rogers, who died as a martyr under Queen Mary in 1555, was a lover of the Word of God. One Sunday, he petitioned his people to adhere to the Bible by warning them what God might say about their neglect of the Scriptures:

“I have trusted you so long with my Bible...it lies in [some] houses all covered with dust and cobwebs, you care not to listen to it. Do you use my Bible so? Well, you shall have my Bible no longer.” Rogers then picked up his Bible and started walking away from the pulpit.

Then he stopped, fell on his knees, and took on the voice of the people, who pleaded, “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.” [Beeke, *Puritan Evangelism*, 1.]

In a world in which the Bible is so readily available to us (I have 20+ copies in my office and probably a couple dozen more at home and dozens on my phone and iPad), it is easy to become complacent and lazy about the Word. We make resolutions at the beginning of each year that “this year will be different.”

To help us with that commitment, on the first and middle Sunday of every year, our worship is focused on Scripture. That is true again this morning, 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 *Tsade* (צ; vv. 137-144). In these verses, the psalmist affirms the righteousness of God and then relates that righteousness to the righteousness of His Word — in all our hard circumstances:

GOD IS RIGHT AND SPEAKS RIGHT IN ALL OUR “WRONG” CIRCUMSTANCES.

The psalmist makes **three statements** about God’s righteous Word...

1. The Righteous **NATURE of God and His Word (vv. 137-138)**

- ✓ What God **IS** is Righteous (v. 137a, 138)
- ✓ What God **SAYS** is Righteous (v. 137b)

2. A Righteous **RESPONSE to God’s Righteous Word (vv. 139-143)**

- ✓ **STAND** for God’s Word (v. 139)
- ✓ **LOVE** God’s Righteous Word (v. 140)
- ✓ **REMEMBER** God’s Righteous Word (v. 141)
- ✓ **DELIGHT** in God’s Righteous Word (vv. 142-143)

3. A Righteous **REQUEST of Our Righteous God (v. 144)**

1. The Righteous NATURE of God and His Word (vv. 137-138)

• What God IS is Righteous (v. 137a)

- ✓ When the psalmist says God is *righteous*, he means that God does what is right. He never does anything that is wrong (immoral, unjust, or unfair). He can only do what is right (cf. v. 40).
- ✓ His righteousness means that He does what is right, but the psalmist is also emphasizing that righteousness is His essence; it is His nature. It is woven into the fabric of His being.

"God's righteousness is essentially his unswerving allegiance to his own name and his own glory. God is righteous to the degree that he upholds and displays the honor of his name. He is righteous when he values most what is most valuable, and what is most valuable is his own glory. Therefore, God's justice — his righteousness — consists most fundamentally in doing what is consistent with the esteem and demonstration of his name, his glory. God would be unrighteous if he did not uphold and display his glory as infinitely valuable." [Piper, "The Freedom and Justice of God in Unconditional Election."]

- ✓ Notice also that the psalmist addresses Him as **LORD** — His covenant name with Israel (YHWH). God's name reveals His covenant faithfulness, and His nature (which is righteous) similarly reveals His covenantal righteousness. He has promised to do right by His people and He will.
- ✓ The righteousness of God is the theme of this stanza (vv. 137, 138, 142). It is also a repeated theme of the rest of Scripture:
 - It is the basis of His freedom from accusation of wrong-doing (beyond reproach, Job 34:10ff).
 - It is the basis of His judgment of the wicked (Ps. 11:6-7; Rom. 1:18ff)
 - It is the basis for His grace and patience with those who are needy and suffering (116:5-6; 145:17)
 - It is the basis for the imputation of His righteousness to sinners (Rom. 1:16-17; 3:25-26)
- ✓ When we are in troubling situations, part of our temptation to anxiousness is "will they do what is right?" — will the repairman treat you fairly and charge equitably? Will the doctor have the needed skill for the surgery? Will your children make wise decisions when they go to college? Will your friend respond graciously to your confession of sin?
- ✓ With God we *never* need to fear whether He will do right; it is His nature to always do what is right. He is incapable of doing what is wrong; He cannot act contrary to His nature.

• What God SAYS is Righteous (v. 137b-138)

- ✓ Because God *is* righteous, then it naturally follows that everything He says is right: **upright are your judgments**. His judgments (His decisions about our circumstances) "stand tall and straight." He is honest in what He says. There is nothing crooked, perverse, or twisted in what He says.

- ✓ Notice how many ways he says that in this stanza: God’s Word is **upright** (137), **righteous** (138), **faithful** (“trustworthy,” 138), **pure** (“tested,” 140), **everlasting** (142), and **true** (142).
- ✓ This also is a repeated theme of this psalm — vv. 7, 62, 75, 106, 123, 138, 144, 160, 164, 172.
- ✓ God’s speech and declarations are always right and always flow out of His righteous nature, which is the point of v. 138 —
 - His **testimonies** (which are His standards and warnings and His “witness” to what is right) are **commanded** (ordered and decreed) as an expression of His righteousness. His commands are not random; all His commands reflect His righteous nature.
 - Further, His commands are an expression of His **exceeding faithfulness** (vv. 75, 86, 90). Now if God’s Word is faithful, there can be no deviation in any way from His faithfulness; but to emphasize the extent of His faithfulness, the psalmist says **exceeding** — strong — an unsurpassed strength. He is “able” to always be faithful.
- ✓ “The Bible mirrors the character of God.” [Boice] So His Word is consistent with His nature.
- ✓ If you sign a contract, you might wonder if the lawyer has slipped something into it to take advantage of you (so you give it to your lawyer...); if you read a biography, you wonder if the author has really done the research and has accurately represented the data; if you listen to a sermon, you might wonder if the preacher did the study himself or is plagiarizing (a big internet topic this week). When you open this book, you never have to wonder if it is right. It is always right. It may at times be hard (because we are resistant to giving up sin and fighting the flesh); but it will always be right and true — and because it is true, it is also good for us (vv. 75, 86).
- ✓ Because God is right and speaks rightly, what will we do with this Word we have been given?

2. A Righteous **RESPONSE** to God’s Righteous Word (vv. 139-143)

• **STAND** for God’s Word (v. 139)

- ✓ The psalmist has **adversaries** (enemies); we don’t know what they did, but throughout this psalm he has indicated that he has been persecuted and troubled — and frequently the trouble is because the psalmist is resolute in defending and acting on God’s Word and truth (vv. 110f; 121, 141, 157-158).
- ✓ Not only do the enemies not obey God and His Word, but they **have forgotten Your words**. He doesn’t mean, “it slipped my mind...” He means they intentionally ignore and disregard God’s Word. Like many of the words in Scripture for sin, he is emphasizing their rebellion against God.
- ✓ Because of their rebellion (as a contrast to it), **my zeal has consumed me**.
 - His jealousy (passionate defense) for God’s Word has “worn him out” — he is exhausted in defending truth. As adversaries increase, so does His defense, and it is exhausting.
 - He says something similar in **Ps. 69:9**; the follower of God is a defender of God (**1 Tim. 3:15**).
- ✓ He defends the truth not only “to be right” (v. 121), but because it is the only hope for his enemies.

“The Bible is not a how-to-book, a self-help book, or an inspirational reading. Scripture does not work like a handbook of abstracted principles, advice, steps, sayings, and anecdotes. Instead, the Word of God reveals God’s person, promises, ways, and will on the stage and in the story of real human lives.” [Powlison]

✓ If the people we know who are enemies of us and God will have hope it will only be thru that Word.

• **LOVE God’s Righteous Word (v. 140)**

- ✓ It’s folly for the enemies of God to ignore the Word of God (v. 139) because it is **pure**. That word refers to a metal that has been refined and the impurities removed; all that remains is the pure metal. In the same way, the Word of God has been tested by the trials of life and found pure.
- ✓ Now if something is pure, how much impurity can be in it? None. But as in v. 138, he adds the word **very** — exceeding. It is “purely pure...pure to the nth degree, infinitely pure.” It is unique in purity.
- ✓ The Word of God is reliable. The psalmist had been in hard situations and the Bible proved to be enough for him (e.g., 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Cf. Abraham (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4); Isaiah (6:7-8); **Jeremiah (1:4)**; Peter (**Jn. 6:68**; **2 Pt. 1:3**, 20-21). It may not have been fully tried in your life, but it has been tried and found true and dependable. You can trust it. But even more...
- ✓ Because of that, the psalmist (**Your servant** — one who is enslaved / in submission to God) **loves it**.
 - He has suffered, he is mocked, he is opposed, but he never thinks any less of the Scriptures.
 - He *loves* the Word — a common response in this psalm (**47-48**, 97, 113, **119**, **127**, 132, 159, **163ff**).
 - He says in essence, “I love what you have to say, tell me what to do in my hard situation...”
- ✓ When suffering, the tendency of the fleshly human heart is to run *from God*, not to Him & His Word.
- ✓ We run from God because we treasure what our trouble has taken away more than we treasure God; our trouble has exposed our idolatry. I don’t need a trouble-free life. I need a Scripture-saturated life. I need to cultivate a dependent love on the Word.
- ✓ Spurgeon: “The Word of God is most precious to the man who most lives upon it.”

• **REMEMBER God’s Righteous Word (v. 141)**

- ✓ This verse reveals more of the psalmist’s trouble — ***I am small and despised***. This is not self-deprecation — “Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, Think I’ll go eat some worms! Big fat juicy ones, Eensie weensy squeensy ones. See how they wiggle and squirm!...”
- ✓ He is considered by others to be insignificant and powerless. They look at him contemptuously. This clause sounds like a psalm of the Suffering Servant (**22:6-8**).
- ✓ It is likely that others think that way of him because he is standing for God and His Word (which is a reminder that we shouldn’t expect to be cheered by the world when we stand for truth).
- ✓ Do you remember what the enemies of the psalmist did? Verse 139 — they **forgot** God’s Word.
- ✓ Because God’s Word is righteous, the psalmist says, ***I do not forget Your precepts***. He is intentionally attentive to obey and follow the **precepts** — particular instructions — of God.

- ✓ This theme of not forgetting is repeated: vv. 16, 83, 93, 109, 153, 176
- ✓ He does not move to depression when he suffers; he asks, “what does God call me to do?”
 - When tempted to be angry, don’t forget God and His commands (Eph. 4:25).
 - When tempted to despair, don’t forget God and His commands (Pss. 42-43).
 - When tempted by prosperity, don’t forget God and His commands (1 Tim. 6:9ff).
 - When tempted by anxiousness, don’t forget God and His commands (Mt. 6:25ff)
 - When tempted by immoral sexual attraction, don’t forget God and His commands (1 Th. 4:3ff)
 - When tempted by persecution, don’t forget God and His commands (1 Pt. 4:12-13)
 - When tempted...don’t forget God and His commands (Lk. 4:3-4)
- ✓ Here is something of an irony — his enemies mock him, “You’re small.” He does not retaliate and instead simply obeys God and thereby does the “big” (essential) thing that God requires of him.
- ✓ When you are suffering (even mocked), don’t forget God’s Word.

• **DELIGHT in God’s Righteous Word (vv. 142-143)**

- ✓ What do you like? I mean really like? What is your passion? I have quite a few: Raye Jeanne, my children and son-in-law, my ministry/job, books (all kinds!), reading, solitude in the morning...
- ✓ Can we say that we delight in the Word? The psalmist can and does. In fact, he says the commandments of God — His directives and imperatives (God’s non-negotiables) **are my delight**.
- ✓ To delight in something is not only to “like” it, but to pursue it, long for it, and work for it. So I like baseball, but I used to really like it and read about it, watch it, collect cards, etc. Now? Not so much.
- ✓ To delight in something is to be consumed with it and work hard for it. That’s what the psalmist thinks of the Word. Why?
 - He delights in the Word because it comes from God’s **everlasting righteousness** (142). God is always righteous and what He says will always be righteous (and good for us). It is dependable.
 - He delights in the Word because God’s **law is truth** (142b). It is not only “true,” but it is **truth** — it embodies and reveals the truth of God; it is inherently and by nature true.
 - He delights in the Word because he has **trouble and anguish** (143). He is “under pressure” — he is “besieged” and in a “hard-pressed” situation. And the pressure is coming from particular people (enemies). And while in that trouble, he has experienced the comfort of God — his circumstances are overwhelming, but because God’s Word isn’t overwhelmed, he isn’t either.
- ✓ The psalmist understands that the **commands** (143) of God are “straight” and God has a right to give commands and instruction — and those commands will not add to his suffering, but will alleviate his pain; they are God’s provision for his pain.
- ✓ When suffering, the temptation might be to pursue ungodly delights — anger, addictive vices (food and others), entertainment, complaints, retribution... Those delights will always fail us. Only God’s righteousness and His righteous Word will satisfy us as a true delight. What is your delight?

3. A Righteous REQUEST of Our Righteous God (v. 144)

- Many of the stanzas of this psalm contain multiple requests from God — “because of Your Word, will You...?” or “Though Your Word will You...?”
- But to this point of this stanza there have been no requests from the psalmist. He has recited how God’s Word is righteous, and he has explained how he will respond to that Word. Now in the final verse of the stanza he finally makes one request: ***give me understanding***.
 - ✓ He simply wants to understand God’s intention and purpose for His life; while we can never know everything there is to know of the infinite God, we *can* know something and he wants to know as much about God and what God says as he can.
 - ✓ He knows that he cannot attain understanding of God on His own; he is dependent on God revealing to him who He is. That’s why this is a familiar request (vv. 27, 34, 73, 95, 100, 104, 125, 130, 169).
 - ✓ He is not asking for more revelation from God; he is asking for more comprehension of God.
- He asks for understanding for two reasons:
 - ✓ First, because God’s ***testimonies are righteous***. They reflect God’s character and they are right. There is nothing wrong in them, so it is natural that he’d want them.
 - ✓ Second, they make him ***live***. There is life in the Word of God. It is the source of life (the provision of life and the direction for how to live that life).
 - If you are not a Christian: God is righteous, which means 1) He will hold you accountable for your rebellion against Him (and you and I *are* rebels; Rom. 1:18; 3:23); 2) He is the source and provision for righteousness: he will impute (account) it to you if you desire it (v. 40; 4:1; 31:1; 71:2). You need to be righteous; only He can make you righteous. Trust Him for that today.
 - If you are a Christian: There is nothing better you can do than trust His righteous Word. Life is hard, and then we flee to the One who is righteous and do what He calls us to do (v. 121).

CONCLUSION: At the beginning of this message I told you something that the Puritan pastor, John Rogers said about Scripture. Now let me tell you what he *did* about Scripture.

As was true of many church leaders in that day, he began his ministry as a Roman Catholic priest. But in the providence of God, he became acquainted with and then a friend of William Tyndale, the translator of the English Bible, and he was saved and converted to faith in Christ under Tyndale’s ministry. Less than a year later, Tyndale was imprisoned for his translation work; but before he was imprisoned he left a copy of part of his work that had not yet been published, the OT books of Joshua through Chronicles. For a year, Rogers worked to put together a copy of



the Scriptures combining the work of Tyndale and Miles Coverdale; the Bible was printed after that year under the pseudonym Thomas Matthews. When King Henry VIII saw it, he had it licensed it as the first authorized English translation of the Bible.

Henry was then succeeded as King by Edward VI, who in turn was replaced by Mary, a devout Roman Catholic and no friend of the Protestants. Rogers was soon arrested for his commitment to Reformation principles (including a departure from the Roman Catholic views on communion). He was imprisoned for a year and questioned on his views of the Reformation and Scripture several times during that year. At the end of the year, he was condemned and sentenced to be burned at the stake. John Foxe tells the end of the story:

Mr. Woodroffe, one of the sheriffs, first came to Mr. Rogers, and asked him, if he would revoke his abominable doctrine, and the evil opinion of the sacrament of the altar. Mr. Rogers answered "that which I have preached I will seal with my blood." Then Mr. Woodroffe said, "Thou art an heretic."...and so [Rogers] was brought the same day, the 4th of February [1555], by the sheriffs, towards Smithfield, saying the psalm Miserere by the way, all the people wonderfully rejoicing at his constancy with great praises and thanks to God for the same. And here, in the presence of Mr. Rochester, comptroller of the queen's household, sir Richard Southwell, both the sheriffs, and a great number of people he was burnt to ashes, washing his hands in the flame as he was burning. A little before his burning, his pardon was brought if he would have recanted; but he utterly refused it. He was the first martyr of all the blessed company that suffered in Queen Mary's time[207] that gave the first adventure upon the fire. His wife and children, being eleven in number, ten able to [walk], and one [infant], met him by the way, as he went towards Smithfield: this sorrowful sight of his own flesh and blood could nothing move him but that he constantly and cheerfully took his death with wonderful patience, in the defence and quarrel of the gospel of Christ. [the first martyr under Mary's reign]

On that day, Rogers gave up his life for this book of Scripture and for dependence on the righteousness that is revealed in it of our great God and of His salvation. God has given this book. Men have died because of and for this book. Do we really want this book — to stand for it, love it, remember it, and delight in it?

BENEDICTION: New member prayer