

A HEART FOR THE WORD
PSALM 119:161-168

This morning, at the beginning of the new year, we want to remind ourselves about the importance of the Bible. What do you know about the Bible?

- ✓ There are 66 books in the Bible (39 in the OT, 27 in the NT).
- ✓ There are 1189 chapters in the Bible (929 in the OT, 260 in the NT)
- ✓ There are 41,173 verses in the Bible (33,214 in the OT, 7,959 in the NT)
- ✓ The shortest book in the Bible is 3 John (the shortest book in OT is Obadiah)
- ✓ The longest book in the Bible is Psalms (the longest in the NT is Luke)
- ✓ The shortest chapter in the Bible is Psalm 117
- ✓ The longest chapter in the Bible is Psalm 119
- ✓ The longest verse in the Bible is Esther 8:9
- ✓ The shortest verse in the Bible is John 11:35
- ✓ To read the Bible aloud takes 70 hours and 40 minutes (52:20 for OT, 18:20 for NT)

But (and we know this), that's not what is most important about the Bible. What is essential about the Bible is its purpose and intent — as our constitution says, it is “the final authority for faith and life.” The Bible is God's revelation to us so that we can be saved and transformed — justified and sanctified. Spurgeon said of this greatest book ever written, “The words of Scripture thrill my soul as nothing else ever can. They bear me aloft or dash me down. They tear me in pieces or build me up. The words of God have more power over me than ever David's fingers had over his harp strings.” Does the Word have that power in your life?

At the beginning and middle of every new year, we spend one Sunday being reminded of the importance of the Word of God in our lives from Psalm 119. This morning, in the next to last stanza (161-168) we are told:

WHEN OPPRESSED, CULTIVATE AFFECTIONS FOR THE WORD AND YOU WILL KNOW COMFORT FROM THE WORD.

In the previous stanza (vv. 153-160), we said that the psalmist's message was “When oppressed, be confident in God to see and respond to your need.” In a similar context of oppression, we see the psalmist advance that theme in this stanza by exhorting the readers to love the Word by obeying the Word and experience the blessings that only that love of the Word can produce.

Observe **four realities** of the Word of God:

1. **Circumstances in Which the Word OPERATES** (v. 161a)
2. **Affections to CULTIVATE** for the Word (vv. 161b-166a)
3. **Benefits that ACCRUE** from the Word (vv. 161b-166a)
4. **A Commitment FITTING** of the Word (vv. 166b-168)

1. Circumstances in Which the Word OPERATES (v. 161a)

- When we use the word “operates,” we mean “functions” — what the Word does. But we also mean a specific kind of function, in which it performs a spiritual medical procedure to remove disease (Heb. 4:12). In what kind of circumstances does the Word operate on our souls?
- The word is operational when ***princes persecute me without cause***.
 - ✓ “Prince” can be any kind of leader — the head of a civic group, military authority, or political leader.
 - ✓ In this instance it appears to be a civil (governmental) authority — those who have influence within Israel (e.g. Ezra 9:1-2). They have ability to make decrees and carry out consequences/punishment.
 - ✓ Earlier these same men were plotting against him (v. 23). Now they are carrying out the plan.
 - ✓ They are acting against him for the purpose of harming him. They have ill will for him — they don’t like him and they are intent on hurting him (because of his faith) — that’s persecution.
 - ✓ Persecution and affliction are common themes in this psalm (vv. 84, 86, 157a).
 - ✓ The psalmist, like we do, lived in a harsh world that was opposed to his faith.
 - ✓ This persecution was also ***without cause*** — it was unjustified.
 - There are times when suffering is just (1 Pt. 2:20).
 - But the psalmist had not sinned to cause this persecution. It was undeserved.
- What will he do when he suffers?
 - ✓ You know what the temptation of the flesh is, don’t you?
 - Complain against God and claim self-righteousness (Job 30:24ff)
 - Ignore God’s counsel in His Word and the fellowship of His people in worship (Heb. 10:23-25)
 - Run to worldly devices for safety and solace (1 Jn. 2:19)
 - ✓ The inclination of the flesh is to say, “I’m suffering, something has gone wrong” (1 Pt. 4:12).
 - ✓ The inclination of the psalmist is to say, “I’m suffering...I go to God’s words.” And that has been his repeated response: vv. 50, 67, 71, 75, 92, 107, 153, 157b.
 - ✓ I don’t know what will go wrong in my world or your world this year, but I do know that there will be several somethings that go wrong (maybe they already have) — we will experience the brokenness of this world and we will be personally sinned against and we will sin and we will hurt.
 - ✓ In those moments, run to the Lord and His Word. Here is the source of wisdom for your trial and comfort for your soul. This book was given to us for our seasons of suffering (and many more).
- If we will run to God’s Word, then we also need to see a second reality, and that is the kinds of affection to cultivate for God and His Word...

2. Affections to CULTIVATE for the Word (vv. 161b–166a)

- Jesus said that out of the overflow of men’s hearts, we speak (Lk. 6:45). We do what we love. Since that is true, we need to cultivate new affections. We need new desires and new ways to think so we can act in new (and redeemed) ways. What kinds of affections (loves/desires) should be cultivated? Here are 5:

• Fear the Word (v. 161b)

- ✓ Despite the power and influence of those who are against him and will harm him, and despite their ability to tempt him to be fearful and anxious of them, he is more awed by God’s Word.
- ✓ The word **awe** is one of fear — trembling in terror and dread. What he dreads (respects and humbles himself before) is God’s evaluation of him and God’s direction for his life.
- ✓ Let’s think about what fear of persecution will do to someone — if we fear persecution for obedience, then will be tempted to stop obeying God so that they stop persecuting. Not the psalmist.
- ✓ As you think about fear, remember that fear drives us to do two things:
 - Fear can drive us away from that which makes us fearful (I will run out of a burning house).
 - Fear can drive us to that which we fear losing (I will go into a burning house to save my wife).
- ✓ Here the psalmist is resolute — when persecuted, he will run towards the one thing he cannot lose, God and His Word.
- ✓ And notice that this is not simply compelled compliance. It is the response of **my heart** — it is a whole-souled, genuine response. In his inner man, this is what he wants.
- ✓ The temptation of the flesh is to think too much about how the world evaluates us and not enough about how God evaluates us. The flesh thinks too much about consequences from the world when we are faithful to the Lord and not enough about God’s blessings from obedience to Him.
- ✓ When you and I are tempted to run in fear from obedience to God, let us remind ourselves of what we really need to fear and honor, let us meditate on His goodness, and let us run to Him in worship.

• Rejoice in the Word (v. 162)

- ✓ Even when persecuted, the psalmist purposefully **rejoices at Your word**.
- ✓ Here “word” is a reference to what God has said (generally) and His promises (more specifically).
- ✓ He even includes a redundant pronoun to emphasize **I...I rejoice...** — he really does (purpose).
- ✓ He intentionally seeks to make himself happy in what God says.
- ✓ Does God’s Word make you happy? Do you delight to open your Bible? Do you anticipate reading it?
- ✓ We do not always find joy in it (Newton) — when that happens, repent, and actively cultivate joy...

“How much time have I lost and wasted, which, had I been wise, I should have devoted to reading and studying the Bible! But my evil heart obstructs the dictates of my judgment; I often feel a reluctance to read this book of books, and a disposition to hew out broken cisterns which afford me no water, while the fountain of living waters is close within my reach.” [John Newton, *Misc. Papers.*]

- Hate what is opposed to the Word (v. 163)

- ✓ Mom frequently said, “don’t say ‘hate.’” “Dislike” was ok. But not “hate.” It’s so harsh.
- ✓ But there is an appropriate use of hatred — we hate sin. In fact, the psalmist is emphatic:
 - ***I hate falsehood*** — “hate” is the strongest of terms; because falsehood is the opposite of truth, the psalmist has the opposite response to it than he does the truth; he hates instead of loves. He does not cultivate falsehood, he is not drawn to it, he does not consider it. It is to him like green peas is to me. He will not tolerate it in any way or form.
 - ***I hate and despise falsehood*** — he abhors and has contempt for falsehood. Combined, the words indicate a loathing and disgust for all things false.
- ✓ Why is hatred of sin and falsehood essential for God’s people? Because until “a man hates [sin] the soul is not thoroughly resolved against it.” [Manton] We won’t fight sin until we hate it.
- ✓ Jay Adams comments, “A pretty good gauge of one’s love for the Bible is how much he hates opposing falsehood.” How are you doing in that test? Do you hate falsehood (false teaching, false speech, false worldviews, false living [hypocrisy])? Or do you merely kinda dislike it? There are no half-way loves of God or half-way hatreds of sin that honor and please the Lord. He is wholeheartedly opposed to evil; we honor him when we are wholeheartedly against all false things.
- ✓ Our growth in godliness is contingent, in part, on our ability to hate what needs to be hated.
- ✓ [And when the world is persecuting us for hating falsehood, this is particularly relevant.]
- ✓ In contrast to hating falsehood, he also ***loves Your law***. That’s remarkable. I don’t know many law lovers. I know lawbreakers. I know law-protestors. I know law-benders. Not many law-lovers.
 - He loves God’s *commands* (“law”) in his life. He loves that he has to submit to God’s authority.
 - To say that he loves God’s commands means he will be faithful to God’s covenant. He will obey.
 - This isn’t the only time he says this (vv. 47-48, 97, 113, 119, 127, 159, 165, 167).
 - All God’s commands are good commands. They may be hard. They may be against the flesh. They may result in sacrifice. But they are all good.
 - “Are you willing to hate what God hates? If not, you will never learn to love God truly, and you will certainly never walk in the way that brings true blessing.” [Boice]

- Praise the God of the Word (v. 164)

- ✓ ***Seven times a day I praise You*** — now he moves from speaking about the Word, to the One who revealed the Word — delight in the Word will lead to delight in the God of the Word.
- ✓ What is ***praise***? It is simply the expression of a deep gratitude and satisfaction in a superior object.
- ✓ Why does he praise the Lord? Because he loves (vv. 163, 165, 167) God’s Word and he knows its transcendent authority and status. We praise what we love. (Listen to what people talk about and you will know what they love.)
- ✓ Why does he praise the Lord ***seven times*** daily? “Seven” is the number for perfection / completion; he is simply saying, “I always, regularly, habitually praise You.” Praise is often on his lips.

- ✓ His praise is further stimulated because of **Your righteous ordinances** — God’s “judgments” and “decision” are all correct and right. He never speaks or acts in error. Everything He does in the life of every individual is always in accord with His infinitely righteous character.
- ✓ And that means that even when we are persecuted, we can praise Him (**Gen. 45:5, 8; Acts 16:25**). He is decreeing rightly.
- ✓ Do you actively, purposefully praise God (especially when you are suffering or persecuted)?

- **Be Confident in God’s Salvation (v. 166)**

- ✓ We have seen the biblical confidence in God’s salvation repeatedly in Hebrews 11 and Zechariah.
- ✓ **Hope** is not wishful desires but a confident waiting that is not yet realized, but must be realized. Biblical cannot be denied. We desire cures for diseases, and patient loan holders, and happy marriages, and obedient children, and kind bosses. But there are no guarantees.
- ✓ God’s salvation is guaranteed. It’s simply a matter of time (cf. **1 Pt. 1:6-9**). We groan on this earth, but the final redemption is coming — it’s sure (**Rom. 8:18**).
- ✓ Note this — just because things seem increasingly harsh and just because you haven’t experienced final salvation yet doesn’t mean God has failed (**2 Pt. 3:7-9ff**). The psalmist knows that — and he remains faithful to obey (which we will see in vv. 166b-168).
- ✓ Life is harsh, but “don’t give up in the dark what God has revealed in the light.” He is coming.

- These are the five attitudes the psalmist cultivates for God and His Word. He intentionally directs his inner man to be satisfied with God and what God says. But why? What is the value of this internal change?

3. Benefits that ACCRUE from the Word (vv. 161b-166a)

- There are implied benefits to the Bible throughout this stanza; let’s see three that are mentioned directly...

- **The Bible is a Treasure to Provide for You (v. 162)**

- ✓ This week I saw an article from the Smithsonian: “96 Fascinating Finds Revealed in 2022” — things like missing artwork (a 16th century oil painting of Mary and Jesus discovered in a 90-year-old woman’s bedroom that sold for \$320,000), rare pottery (an 18th century Qing Dynasty vase sitting on someone’s kitchen counter that sold for \$1.8 million), ancient art (eight marble slabs that that were unearthed from the time of Sennacherib, 8th century, B.C.), and 93 more rare and valuable items.
- ✓ But the psalmist says there is something more valuable than even these things: the Word of God.
- ✓ To “find” the Word of God is to **find great spoil** — it is like the booty gained from victorious battle.
- ✓ It is riches (**v. 14**), better than silver and gold (**vv. 72, 127**), like honey for hungry man (**v. 103**).
- ✓ Listen to how one commentator says it is valuable in three ways:

“For it is found at a time of victory; it is of great value; and it is unexpected. I thought I was a loser, and the world thinks I am a loser, but I find in the word of God that I am a winner; God is for me. I thought I was poor and find in the word that I am rich, with all the fullness of Christ. I thought it was just tough tough tough, and unexpectedly I stumble on the pearl of great price. I find that as one of Abraham’s family, Christ’s family, I am heir of the world; I will inherit the earth; the world is mine, all things are mine in Christ. And so even as princes persecute me, I rejoice.” [Bible Delight, 191.]

✓ I don’t have a Qing Dynasty vase in my kitchen, but I do have the Word of God. May 2023 reflect that I am a possessor of God’s great treasure to mankind.

• The Bible is Instruction to Give You Peace (v. 165a)

- ✓ I suppose it has always been this way, but this time in the world’s history seems particularly to be defined and explained by the words “discontent,” “animosity,” “unrest.”
- ✓ Notice, then, what we receive from the Word of God: **those who love Your law have great peace.**
 - Having the law usually brings conviction and condemnation because we don’t keep it.
 - But *loving* the law of God leads to salvation. We want God to direct us; and when we can’t do what He says we will appeal to God for the grace of His salvation (vv. 41, 94, 146, 174).
 - And what happens when He saves us? **Peace.** One of the most well-known words in Hebrew is “peace” (*Shalom*). But this is the only time it is used in Psalm 119. Isn’t that fitting? Only when we love what God says (and stop fighting Him), will we have the peace we want.
 - We may not have peace with the world (v. 161), but we will have peace with our greatest enemy, God, who has reconciled us to Him.
- ✓ Friend, if you are not a believer in Jesus Christ, you don’t have this peace (though you may be mistakenly telling yourself you do have it). In **Romans 5:1** Paul tells us that when we are justified (declared righteous) by faith (believing in Christ’s death and resurrection), we have peace with God.
 - We were sinners against God (5:8) and enemies of God (5:10).
 - But Christ died for us (5:8), taking God’s eternal (and righteous) anger against our sin.
 - When we believe in Him (agreeing He is worth living for) God accounts His perfect righteousness to us, as if we obeyed in every way as He did. He is a friend and Father and no longer angry against us as He was when we were His enemies.
 - Would you believe so that you can have this peace with God?

• The Bible is Direction to Keep You From Sin (v. 165b)

- ✓ Unsaved people can only sin; they can do nothing but sin.
- ✓ While saved people no longer have to sin, sin is the great trouble in our lives. Absence of sin is what makes Heaven particularly attractive (no sin means we get to see God, 1 Jn. 3:1ff).
- ✓ While we live on this earth and have this flesh, we will struggle against sin. Where is help?
- ✓ **And nothing causes them to stumble** — Because lovers of God’s Word have the peace of God, then

nothing can *make them* stumble into sin. When one loves the Word of God, he will be protected from falling into sin. Neither inward nor outward temptation will overwhelm him and lead to sin.

- ✓ Simply, “Those who love God’s law will know how to resist the devil so that he will flee from them (James 4:7).” [Adams, 134.]
 - ✓ What is the benefit of the Bible? It is the greatest defense against your greatest daily problem, sin.
 - ✓ Cf. **vv. 9, 11, 105**; Luke 4:1; Eph. 6:18. When we ignore (misuse or disuse) the Bible, we ignore the greatest instrument God has given us to fight against sin.
 - ✓ It has been well said that “This book will keep you from sin or sin will keep you from this book.”
- Is the Bible beneficial? Is there value in this book? Yes. Infinitely yes. It is the treasure that leads to salvation and sanctification. It is of infinite value now and in eternity, on earth and in Heaven.

4. A Commitment FITTING of the Word (vv. 166b–168)

- Since this Word shapes our desires and is so valuable, what will we do with it? Obey it.
 - ✓ The psalmist says ***I do Your commandments*** (v. 166) — whatever God declares, he does.
 - ✓ He also says ***his soul keeps Your testimonies*** (167) — he protects by obedience all God declares and warns. He does that from his soul — it’s his inward desire and longing to obey (e.g., **Dt. 6:5**).
 - ✓ Using the same word in v. 168, he says he protects God’s ***precepts and testimonies*** — he attends to God’s intricate, detailed instructions and His righteous and faithful declarations.
 - ✓ Notice that v. 168 also provides a motive — ***for all my ways are before You***. He is aware of God’s omniscience — He obeys because God knows all things.
 - This might imply a warning — “don’t disobey because God is watching and will know...”
 - More likely (because he isn’t sinning) — “Obey because God is keeping an eye on you and will guide and help you whenever you have trouble.” He knows you and cares for you. **Ps. 118:5-7**.
- What is interesting about the statements in vv. 166-168 is that they are present tenses: this *is* his life.
 - ✓ It is a reminder that it is possible for the follower of God to obey God. We don’t have to sin. Even in the OT, God’s people could obey (once saved); that is especially so now, as we have the HS to guide.
 - ✓ But these also flow out of a commitment and desire to obey. Sometimes we fall into sin simply because we haven’t become resolute in fighting against a particular sin.
 - ✓ We have the Word. We have the Spirit. Obedience is fitting. Now is the time to obey.

CONCLUSION: Thomas Watson wrote about the Bible: “**Read the Bible with reverence**. Think in every line you read that God is speaking to you. **Read with seriousness**. It is matter of life and death...**Read the Word with affection**. Get your hearts quickened with the Word; go to it to fetch fire....**Read the scripture**, not only as a history, but as a love letter sent you from God, which may affect your hearts.”

BENEDICTION: **Psalm 19:12-14**