

# **LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for November 29: Obeyâ€™s Godâ€™s word**

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Psalm 119 is the giant among the psalms, weighing in with 176 verses. It actually is an acrostic based on the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The psalm is divided into 22 stanzas. Each stanza has eight lines, corresponding the verse markings in the English translations. The first letter of each line in each stanza begins with the same Hebrew letter. The acrostic is lost in translation but can be followed by referencing the headings of each stanza.

Psalm 119 is further known for its theme: a meditation on God's law. For a modern reader used to democratic society, fondness for the law, especially God's law, may not be readily appreciated. Familiarity with the logic of the ancient Hebrew followers of God helps one to understand and experience the delight in God's law as expressed in this psalm.

For the Hebrews, every communication from God was cherished as an expression of his grace, whether it was an expression of compassion or a command. God's commands were not considered as cold, lifeless, absolute, out-of-touch requirements. The Hebrew word "law" (Torah) actually means "to teach" or "to direct" at its core. So God's law was seen as teaching the lifestyle that pleases God and draws his continuing favor. Realizing this, the Hebrew believer delighted in God's commands as expressions of his desire. This delight in following God's will saturates Psalm 119.

Eight standard descriptors of God's law are found in Psalm 119 and used repeatedly without following a pattern. Other lesser used descriptors are found as well, including "way" in verse 3. All eight main descriptors are

found in the 16 verses of the present lesson: (1) Law (*torah*), the chief term used for God's Word in Psalm 119 (v. 1); (2) Testimonies (*'edot*) to God's high standard (vv. 2, 14); (3) Precepts (*piqqudim*) which provide detailed instructions (vv. 4, 15); (4) Statutes (*huqqim*) which speak to the permanence of God's instruction (vv. 5, 8, 12, 16); (5) Commandments (*miswot*) that emphasize the authority of what is spoken (v. 6); (6) Ordinances/Judgments (*mispaticim*) which derive as the result of an active all-wise Judge (vv. 7, 13); (7) Word (*dabar*) which generally refers to God's spoken truth (vv. 9, 16); and (8) Promise/Word (*'imra*) which derives from the word "to say" (v. 11).

Though the present lesson handles the first two stanzas, many memorable verses are found throughout Psalm 119: Verse 11: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you"; Verse 89: "Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens"; Verse 97: "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long"; Verse 105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."

### **Live the word (Psalm 119:1-8)**

Verse 1 opens with a beatitude ("Blessed are those....") which suggests the topic of the psalm: delight in the law of the Lord. Similarly Psalm 1 opens with a beatitude. It appears that Psalm 119:1 has recast and summarized Psalm 1:1-2, adopting the theme of delighting in the law of the Lord as the meditative point for the entire psalm.

Verse 2 includes another beatitude, extending the thought of verse 1. In verse 1, the blameless are those who walk according to God's law. In verse 2, those who keep God's statutes are those who seek him with all their hearts. The key to keeping God's law is found at the heart level. The introduction of the heart to the discussion explains the psalm's reverential and enthusiastic treatment of God's law.

Several of the main descriptors of God's word are found in the first eight verses. The meanings have been indicated above. A review of the meanings and interplay of each of these descriptors helps one to see the various aspects of God's word and its importance for our lives.

Curiously, the word "way" dominates the discussion of the first eight verses. It is found in verses 1 and 5, describing the lifestyle of the follower of God. It also occurs in verse 3, describing God's lifestyle and is therefore synonymous with God's word.

The overall movement of the first stanza is to encourage the believer to follow God's law. Compiling the action-oriented ideas can be helpful (walking, seeking, obeying, considering, learning). These are not idle actions. They speak to motive, meditation and discovery. God's commands may seem difficult and even harsh to the outsider, but for the follower of God who actively pursues God's will, pleasant (blessed) results readily are forthcoming.

### **Treasure the word (Psalm 119:9-11)**

Seeking and hiding could be a good theme for the first verses of stanza two. Verse 10 announces the worshipper's personal commitment to seek God with all their heart. Immediately follows the well-known declaration that the author has "hidden" God's word in his heart. The point is that the mind and will that stores up God's word has its preferences and judgments in life educated and influenced by God.

The emphasis on the heart (vv. 2, 7, 10-11 and 12 later verses) establishes one of several secondary topical threads in Psalm 119: the necessary involvement of the heart in the enterprise of pleasing God and realizing the promised blessed results. This portion of the stanza emphasizes the necessary integrity of the heart and its commitment to God's word.

Verse 9 picks up and brings forward the concept of blamelessness from

verse 1. Blameless is a life that is free from legal accusation. The word “pure” denotes a life lived with qualities that cannot be blamed. Verse 11 provides the counterpoint, the purpose of all heart-directed activity is so that one will not sin against the Lord.

The lesson of these verses is that God’s word, his commands, decrees, statutes, etc., are capable of guiding an individual successfully away from sin. The proper human response to God’s word then is the engagement of life at the point of the heart in pursuit of the fulfillment of God’s will. Also, acknowledging God’s high standard, the author appeals with confidence to the Lord for assistance in verse 10.

### **Study the word (Psalm 119:12-16)**

The second portion of the stanza focuses on the activity of the delighted follower of God. They cannot help but praise the Lord for revealing himself through his decrees. Five activities are featured in the five verses: praising, recounting, rejoicing, meditating, delighting. Note that the pattern is heart, mind, heart, mind and heart.

The pattern actually begins with the Lord’s revelation of his law, making the praise the first human reaction, after which as the mind is applied to understanding God’s law and the heart repeatedly reacts by delighting in the discoveries from God’s word. The key is not so much a study strategy but a heart-generated activity from which the best of all human involvement in any endeavor flows. Here the endeavor is to please the Lord, not merely to satisfy laws and commands.

Notice also how God’s law is described in these verses: belonging to the Lord, delivered by God’s mouth, rich in value and revealing God’s ways. The covenant Lord has drawn near and communicated himself to his people. It is a momentous occasion to be treasured above all.

Verse 16 states the theme of Psalm 119 for the first of many times. Indeed the delight in God's law saturates the psalm. Notice also the commitment expressed in negative terms, "I will not neglect your word." These concluding words answer the negative plea of verse 8: "do not utterly forsake me."

Perhaps the great fear of God's people could be expressed as being forsaken. Some Bible characters such as Job express a feeling of abandonment by God. Yet the Bible takes great pains to answer and reassure the people of the Lord that God will never abandon his beloved people (Deuteronomy 31:8). The present verse indicates one method to avoiding such forsaking: commitment to follow and obey God's word—flowing from the confidence that God will respond favorably to such a life.

The first two stanzas of Psalm 119 richly represent the material of this marvelous psalm. The overall message of the psalm could be expressed in the phrase, "obey God's word," yet perhaps the advantage is to understand that the heart's delight in God's word yields obedience to God's word.