



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## The Word: the Way to God's Blessing Psalm 119:1-8

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Last Sunday was Trinity Sunday. It marks the beginning of the second half of the Church Year. The first half of the year, from Advent to Whitsunday, is about the life *of* Christ; the second half is about our life *in* Christ. And so it makes sense that since ancient times the psalm appointed for singing or reading on the Sundays of Trinitytide is Psalm 119. Maybe more than any other of the psalms, the 119<sup>th</sup> tells us how to live as God's people. Martin Luther called it the gospel in a nutshell and said that he wouldn't trade one page of it for the entire world.

The psalm itself is a long one. In fact, it's the longest chapter in the Bible at 176 verses. It's said that the Scottish reformer George Wishart, when he was about to be executed for heresy, was asked what passage of scripture he would like read before he was hanged. He was expecting a pardon, but it hadn't yet arrived and there he was standing on the gallows with the noose around his neck, so he requested Psalm 119. And the story goes that just as the priest was finishing the psalm, a rider arrived carrying Wishart's pardon. (It's a good thing Wishart's favourite Bible verse wasn't "Jesus wept"!)

Now the reason the psalm is so long is that it's actually an acrostic poem. Each stanza is made up of eight lines and in each stanza those eight lines all begin with the same letter of the alphabet. Every line in the first stanza begins with *aleph*, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Then in the second stanza each line begins with the second letter, *beth*, and so on through the whole Hebrew alphabet, which gives us twenty-two stanzas—one being appointed for each of the first twenty-two Sundays after Trinity Sunday. It's an ABC's, if you will, of the life and experience of the Christian. And so for the next twenty-two Sundays it is my goal to preach through these stanzas. We're the people of Living Word Parish and our focus as a congregation needs to be, and I hope is consistently, on the word of God, both as

it is written in the scriptures and as it is incarnate in his Son, Jesus Christ. It shouldn't be any surprise that Psalm 119 has the same focus—that the believer must be rooted in God's holy word and that God's blessing comes in the form of holiness and godliness. Jonathan Edwards said, "I know of no part of the Holy Scriptures where the nature and evidences of true and sincere godliness are so fully and largely insisted on and delineated as in the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The Psalmist declares his design in the first verse of the Psalm, keeps his eye on it all along, and pursues it to the end. The excellency of holiness is represented as the immediate object of a spiritual taste and delight. God's law—that grand expression and emanation of the holiness of God's nature, and prescription of holiness to the creature—is all along represented as the great object of the love, the complacency, and the rejoicing of the gracious nature, which prizes God's commandments 'above gold, yea, the finest gold;' and to which they are 'sweeter than honey and the honey-comb.'

With that, let's look at that first verse. If you've got your Bibles with you, please turn to Psalm 119. I'll be preaching from the English Standard Version, but the Coverdale translation in the Prayer Book is not far off and you can follow along there just as easily, on page 421. I want to look this morning at the first stanza, the *aleph* stanza, which introduces the rest of the psalm. The Psalmist says:

**Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD!** (Psalm 119:1)

Everybody wants blessing, but we all have two problems as we go looking for that blessing. The first is that because we are fallen—because our natural inclinations are always *away* from God and what he wants for us—what we consider blessed is never what God considers blessed. He created us as blessed creatures, but we rejected the life he gave us and ever since we've been redefining what it means to be blessed, sometimes it's money and worldly "things" but even when we create what seem to us lofty and altruistic goals—say, world peace—we ignore God. It doesn't matter how good it is, if it doesn't have God at the centre, it's not truly blessed. And of course, because we're looking for everything except the blessing God wants for us, we go looking for it in all the wrong places. We trust in ourselves or, if we're smart enough to

know that we can never truly be self-sufficient, we try to squeeze blessings out of others or we insist that we have an inherent right to be blessed and insist that our government give that blessing. Maybe we do look to God for blessing, and yet the god we look to isn't the true God—it's an idol of our own making, a cosmic genie, who exists only to grant our wishes, only to grant what we think is best for us. The human race is looking for blessing, but we don't know what real blessing is and we're looking for it everywhere but in the one place we can find it. And so God tells us through the Psalmist: blessing—real blessing—is found in being blameless—in being holy—and that we find that holiness as we walk in God's law.

From the world's perspective that's as upside-down as it gets. Remember back to when we studied Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and he said all those things about the people God blesses: the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. The world says that you get blessing only when you grab everything you can for yourself. Blessing comes to the tough, to the hardboiled, and to the troublemakers—to the people who know how to get what they want. Of course, that's because the world's ideas of what it is to be blessed are, well, worldly. There's no thought for God's kingdom and his priorities. Submit to God? The world says, "Not me! No way!" If you want blessing everyone and everything has to submit to you!

In a way Psalm 119 is an Old Testament parallel to the Beatitudes. In fact, when the ancient Jews translated the Scriptures into Greek, they translated the Hebrew word that is used here for blessing using the Greek word *makarios*—the same one that St. Matthew uses when he records Jesus' sermon on blessing. God's idea of blessing is well-being and happiness in the deepest sense. It's to be in the state that he created us—or at least as close as we can be to it this side of the New Jerusalem. Ultimately it's to be in fellowship with God—the very thing that humanity lost in the Fall.

If we understand that real blessing means fellowship with God, then it ought to make sense that blessing comes with blamelessness—with holiness. Sin separates us from God. He is perfectly holy and for that reason he cannot tolerate

sin—not even a “little” bit. Because he is just, he’s obligated by his very nature to punish us for our sins. That’s why he sent his Son. Jesus did what we can never do. He was perfect. He was holy and blameless, and when he died he took our punishment on himself. Now as we trust in the sacrifice he made on our behalf and as we make him our Lord, we can be holy again. We can come into the presence of the Father with Jesus as he covers us with the long robe of his righteousness. The Father sees not our sins, but the holiness of Jesus.

In that sense the Psalmist points to Christ. Jesus was the only one who ever truly walked in the law of the LORD, and yet even as through Christ we are declared holy before God, he declares us holy *so that* we can begin living lives of *actual* holiness. Not perfectly—never on this side of eternity—but still actual holiness. The Holy Spirit indwells us and grafts us into Christ. He gives us new life and he gives us power over sin. He changes our priorities. He turns us away from the world and all the world’s mixed up ideas about what it means to be blessed, and he turns us to God and makes fellowship with him and living a life pleasing to him our new priorities. And of course as he turns our eyes in that direction, he directs our steps there too—we start down a new path as we follow the ways of God—as we walk in his “law” as the Psalmist says.

Now what does that mean? The Hebrew word is *torah*. It refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, which the Jews referred to as “the Law,” because the law that God gave his people through Moses dominates those books. There are eight different words that the Psalmist uses throughout Psalm 119 that are almost, but not quite, synonymous: law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, judgements, word, and way. One of these words is found in every single verse except for verse 90, and they all refer to God’s revelation in terms of his instructions to his people. We don’t know who wrote Psalm 119. It may have been David, and some aspects of it are similar to the psalms we know he wrote, but there are other aspects that suggest this psalm was written much later, maybe after the Babylonian Exile. But if it was written by David, consider that the only parts of the Bible written in his day were the *torah*—those

first five books—and maybe Joshua and Judges. When he writes about the law, that was his Bible, and so there’s a sense in which all these words Psalm 119 uses—law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, judgements, word, and way—simply refer to Holy Scripture. Remember St. Paul wrote to Timothy that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). That’s the same principle that the Psalmist is getting at here. True blessing is found in holiness, and true holiness is to follow the instructions God has given us in Scripture—to walk close to God. Now look at verse 2:

**Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart,**

Again we ask, “How can I be blessed by God?” And the Psalmist tells us: “Keep God’s testimonies.” When we think of God’s *law* we think of his commands—of the thou shalt’s and thou shalt not’s—the rules we follow to please God. And yet there’s more to godliness than just following rules. The Pharisees followed the rules, but they weren’t particularly godly. God warned his people over and over that lip-service and going through outward religious motions wasn’t enough—in fact he hated that kind of external piety. So, ask yourself: What’s a testimony? It’s a record of evidence. When you testify in court, you give evidence. When God testifies in Scripture he goes beyond merely telling us what to do and not to do. Yes, we can learn about him by studying his rules, but he doesn’t just leave us rules. Holy Scripture is a testimony of God to his people: who he is, what he’s like, how he works, what he does, and what he wants from us—so that we can know him.

Notice the Psalmist says that the man or woman who is blessed keeps those testimonies and then follows that saying, “who seeks him with his whole heart.” Maybe “keep” is an understatement. I read an article this past Fall about a guy who was obsessed with airline travel back in the days when it was still fun and still a luxury. As a kid his family flew a lot on Pan-Am and he would walk the aisles

collecting “souvenirs” that other people would throw away: placemats, coffee stirrers, cups, headphones, brochures, and then he’d take it all home where he carefully stored it all away for years. Now he’s an adult and has turned his obsession into an actual mock-up of a Pan-Am 747 first class cabin in his garage with walls, floors, stairs, seats, a bar—everything—scavenged from old Pan-Am planes. And it’s real right down to the dishes and silverware, placemats and coffee stirrers. In fact, the article told how he had recently heard about a company that had made headsets for Pan-Am in the 1970’s and had several crates that had been in storage for thirty years. This guy went all the way to Singapore to pick them up.

Now would you say that that man’s whole heart was involved in his hobby? He didn’t just “keep” airline paraphernalia—he *treasured* it, maybe even hoarded it—it became his life. And so for the man or woman who has his or her whole heart set on seeking God. Religion isn’t a hobby. A Bible isn’t something we pull out every once in a while like you would a stamp album. We don’t even just crack it open to read a few chapters each day—readings that we might not even remember an hour later. No, the one who truly *seeks* after God, pours over his testimonies—the word wherein God reveals himself to us—and *treasures* that word, mediates on it, memorises it, makes it a part of his life, that he might know God better. We know God as we know his word. If you don’t know God’s word, you can never truly know God. Do we pursue the knowledge of God and fellowship with him like we pursue other things in life? Is the pursuit of God a hobby, or is it our life?

Verse 3 shows us the results of walking in God’s law and keeping his testimonies. It describes these people as those:

**who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways!**

That doesn’t mean we’re perfect, but it’s also true that the more we seek after God the less wrong we will do. And yet it’s more than just doing no wrong—we walk in God’s ways. Is God holy simply because he does no wrong? Of course not. Doing good is as much a part of holiness as doing no wrong. Think of it this way. What if a farmer thought his only job was to keep his fields free of weeds. We could

look at his beautiful acres and acres of weed-free...dirt. Would we call him a good farmer? No. A productive farmer not only keeps the weeds at bay, but plants a crop and tends it so that it will grow. Brothers and sisters, we need to think of holiness in terms beyond just avoiding sin. We need to remember that holiness is also to do good—it's to know God and follow after him. It's not enough to not hate your enemy. Show him love and do good to him. For most of us that's a challenge and it serves as a reminder that we need to spend more time seeking after God and treasuring up his testimonies!

The Psalmist goes on in verse 4:

**You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.**

Here he talks about what God desires from us in terms of precepts. The idea behind a precept is a command, but more than that; it's a command that God has *entrusted* us with. If God entrusts you with something, would you ignore and squander it? It's sad to say that we do all the time, but we *shouldn't!* Consider how many earthly things we treasure—things that have no eternal value—and then consider how much we ignore the things God has given us, favouring the earthly things over the heavenly things. It doesn't make sense, but it happens because our thinking is still worldly. This is exactly why we need diligently to seek after God and his word as we long to have our mind, our perspective, and our thinking changed. If our perspective is heavenly, it'll be completely natural to diligently keep the precepts God gives us. We diligently apply ourselves to the things we care about most. If you've got something worldly in one hand and a gift from God in the other and need to make a choice between the two, what are you going to do? If you throw away the divine in favour of the worldly, it's because you need to do more of what the Psalmist exhorts us to in this psalm!

Now, knowing what he needs to do and knowing that he doesn't have the power in himself to do it, the Psalmist prays. Look at verse 5:

**Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!**

As we seek to please God, we're prone to making two mistakes. On the one hand, lots of people think that pleasing God is just a matter of will-power and that they can avoid sin and do good all on their own—that it's just a matter of knowing what God wants and then doing it. We've all probably tried that at some point. Some of you may still be trying that despite experience telling you that it's not working. Brother and sisters, you and I can never pursue holiness without the help of God. And so the Psalmist asks for help. He cries out to God: "Keep me steadfast in following you!"

But I said there are *two* mistakes we make. One the one hand we can try to do it on our own, but there's an opposite mistake. Have you ever heard someone say: "Just let go and let God"? We have the modern Holiness Movement to thank for this little piece of bad advice that has led millions of Christians to seek after holiness by doing nothing more than praying for it. That's just as futile as trying to do it on your own. Yes, the Psalmist pleads with God for help, but he also reminds us that God expects us to actively seek after holiness *steadfastly, diligently* and *tenaciously* by committing ourselves to the knowledge of God and his ways as they are revealed in Scripture. I know of no better way to overcome a particular sin than to study scriptures that address it and then commit them to memory—and then to ask the Holy Spirit to make every occasion of temptation into an opportunity for obedience as he brings the precepts of God to mind.

Think about that. Do you ask God for help in pursuing holiness? That's just as important as knowing what his standard of holiness is. Does your daily time of prayer include not only confession of sin, but also an appeal to God for help in overcoming it? This is the point behind the Collect for Grace in Morning Prayer in which we pray, "keep us by your mighty power, and grant that today we fall into no sin...but lead and govern us in all things, that we may always do what is righteous in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord." It's the point behind our post-Communion prayer in which we pray, "And here we offer and present to you, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice, humbly beseeching you that all we who are partakers of this holy communion may

be fulfilled with your grace and heavenly benediction." St. Paul calls us to be living sacrifices. Have you ever thought about what that means? If you put a living sacrifice on the altar, its natural tendency is to climb back off that altar and run away—and that's just what our struggle is as Christians. We need, each day, to consciously lay ourselves on God's altar and then pray that as we are diligent in seeking to know him and his ways, his Spirit will change our hearts and open our eyes to the great value of staying on the altar when we'd rather climb down and run away. Because, friends, staying on the altar has its benefits—that's where we find God's blessing, but it's a blessing we won't understand unless our hearts and minds have been regenerated by the Spirit. The Psalmist goes on in verse 6:

**Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.**

Shame is the consequence of sin, but with God's help we can overcome sin and not have to experience that shame as we fix our eyes on *all* his commandments. Notice that word *all*. Whether we realise it or not we struggle with that word. Thomas Manton wrote, "Many will do some good, but are defective in other things and usually in those which are most necessary. They cull out the easiest and cheapest parts of religion, such as do not contradict their lusts and interests." When we're really honest with ourselves, we have to admit that a lot of the sins we avoid and a lot of the good we do have the wrong motive behind them. We avoid a lot of sins not because we desire to please God, but because we fear getting caught. We happily "overcome" the sins that we aren't particularly attached to, but all of us have certain sins that we secretly love—sins no one knows about or that most people are willing to ignore. One of the surest signs of Christian maturity and a sign that our hearts are being drawn closer to God is our giving up of those secret sins we love—when we are willing to fix our eyes on *all* God's commandments, not just the ones that are convenient or that aren't painful for us to follow. He goes on in verse 7:

**I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous rules.**

How often do we rejoice and praise God when his law convicts us of sin or calls us to some new duty that we've never seen before? As the Spirit shows us some place where we're deficient in holiness, do we groan about it as if it's some new chore we have to deal with? For the maturing Christian who is devoted to God, the Spirit's sanctifying work may bring tears as we realise how we've failed God, but it also causes us to rejoice and praise him as he works to make us holy so that we can walk all the more closely with him.

It's interesting where the Psalmist goes from the theme of praise. Look at verse 8:

**I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me!**

I will keep your statutes. Real praise results in action. Charles Spurgeon preached, "When praise calms down into solid resolution it is well with the soul. Zeal which spends itself in singing, and leaves no practical residuum of holy living, is little worth: 'I will praise' should be coupled with 'I will keep.' As I said last week when I preached on worship, real worship is the result of feelings for God that come from the knowledge of who he is and what he's done. What he expects from us is part of that too. Praise is the result of a desire for God and so true praise is always going to go hand in hand with a real desire for keeping God's statutes—with being obedient to him. But as we all know, it's a daily struggle. The stanza closes with a plea for grace. The Psalmist knew the struggle and so he cries out "Do not utterly forsake me!" Brothers and sisters, that's the prayer of a man who knows that he is a sinner in need of God's grace. Is that our prayer? Or do we still think we can do it on our own? "Do not utterly forsake me!" That's the prayer of a man who desires God enough to offer himself as a living sacrifice, but still cries out to God to provide the fire.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, you have given us new life through the death and resurrection of your Son and regenerated our hearts by your indwelling Spirit, and yet so often the enticements of the world draw us away from you. Give us a passion for you and give us a passion to know your word that we might follow you more closely and find blessing in your presence. Give us an all-consuming passion to draw near to you by knowing

your law, your testimonies, your ways, your precepts, and your commandments, that we might daily place ourselves on your altar as living sacrifices, while relying on your grace to keep us there in the centre of your blessed will. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, who makes us holy. Amen.