

Psalm 119:1 – 32

A Aleph.

- ¹ How blessed are those whose way is blameless,
 Who walk in the law of the LORD.
² How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,
 Who seek Him with all their heart.
³ They also do no unrighteousness;
 They walk in His ways.
⁴ You have ordained Your precepts,
 That we should keep them diligently.
⁵ Oh that my ways may be established
 To keep Your statutes!
⁶ Then I shall not be ashamed
 When I look upon all Your commandments.
⁷ I shall give thanks to You with uprightness of heart,
 When I learn Your righteous judgments.
⁸ I shall keep Your statutes;
 Do not forsake me utterly!

B Beth.

- ⁹ How can a young man keep his way pure?
 By keeping it according to Your word.
¹⁰ With all my heart I have sought You;
 Do not let me wander from Your commandments.
¹¹ Your word I have treasured in my heart,
 That I may not sin against You.
¹² Blessed are You, O LORD;
 Teach me Your statutes.
¹³ With my lips I have told of
 All the ordinances of Your mouth.
¹⁴ I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,
 As much as in all riches.
¹⁵ I will meditate on Your precepts
 And regard Your ways.
¹⁶ I shall delight in Your statutes;
 I shall not forget Your word.

G Gimel.

- ¹⁷ Deal bountifully with Your servant,
 That I may live and keep Your word.
¹⁸ Open my eyes, that I may behold
 Wonderful things from Your law.
¹⁹ I am a stranger in the earth;
 Do not hide Your commandments from me.
²⁰ My soul is crushed with longing
 After Your ordinances at all times.
²¹ You rebuke the arrogant, the cursed,
 Who wander from Your commandments.
²² Take away reproach and contempt from me,
 For I observe Your testimonies.
²³ Even though princes sit and talk against me,
 Your servant meditates on Your statutes.
²⁴ Your testimonies also are my delight;
 They are my counselors.

D Daleth.

- ²⁵ My soul cleaves to the dust;
 Revive me according to Your word.
²⁶ I have told of my ways, and You have answered me;
 Teach me Your statutes.
²⁷ Make me understand the way of Your precepts,
 So I will meditate on Your wonders.
²⁸ My soul weeps because of grief;
 Strengthen me according to Your word.
²⁹ Remove the false way from me,
 And graciously grant me Your law.
³⁰ I have chosen the faithful way;
 I have placed Your ordinances before me.
³¹ I cling to Your testimonies;
 O LORD, do not put me to shame!
³² I shall run the way of Your commandments,
 For You will enlarge my heart.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *The Poetry of Psalm 119.* The first letter of every stanza begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order. Typically, acrostic poetry was meant to be memorized.
- *Reflecting on the Torah:* The ‘law’ of the Lord is an unfortunate translation, as ‘law’ in Western society has the connotation of ‘commandments.’ The Hebrew word is really ‘teaching’ (*torah*) which is the larger *narrative* of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Torah includes *stories* of the relationship between God and people (testimonies, ways, wonders), along with the *commands* God gave people (statutes, commandments, precepts, and ordinances). At the time Psalm 119 was composed, *torah* would include ‘the Prophets’ (*nevi'im*) which is ‘the Seven’ (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), and ‘the Twelve’ (the twelve minor prophets, Hosea through Malachi).

Questions

1. (Get the thoughts going before you read Psalm 119) What is the value of knowing your family story or family stories? Give an example.
2. (Get the thoughts going after reading Psalm 119) Why would someone write this Psalm? What do we get in Psalm 119 that we did not get in Psalm 1?
3. What are the words for the Scriptures, and its components? (Or just get a sampling from people)
 - a. The *torah* of the LORD (v.1, 18)
 - b. Testimonies (v.2)
 - c. Ways (v.3, 5)
 - d. Precepts (v.4)
 - e. Statutes (v.5)
 - f. Commandments (v.6)
 - g. Righteous judgments (v.7)
 - h. Word (v.9, 11, 16)
 - i. Ordinances (v.13)
 - j. Wonders (v.27)
4. What is God doing?
 - a. Blessing those who keep His word (v.1 – 2)
 - b. Teaching (v.12)
 - c. Dealing bountifully (v.17)
 - d. Revealing truth (v.18)
 - e. Rebuking the arrogant (v.21)
 - f. Revives me (v.25)
 - g. Answers me when I am transparent to Him (v.26)
 - h. Strengthens me when I grieve (v.28)
 - i. Removes the false way from me, grants me His teaching (v.29)
 - j. Does not put me to shame (v.31)
 - k. Enlarges my heart (v.32)
5. What am I supposed to be doing? Break it down by active and passive verbs
 - a. Active Verbs: walk, seek, keep, look, give thanks, learn, treasure, rejoice, delight, etc.
 - b. Passive Verbs: be established, not be ashamed, etc.
6. Why the repetition?
 - a. How is ‘walking’ different from ‘seeking’?
 - b. How is ‘learning’ different from ‘I have rejoiced’ and ‘I shall delight’?
 - c. Does it matter if you are more of a practical and active person vs. a contemplative and learning person vs. an emotional and feeling person?
7. How can knowing our family story feel like less of a burden and more of a privilege?
 - a. There is movement in God’s story with people. It’s like an immigrant family story or a freedom and liberation family story. That story inspires us because who we are is built on the people who came before us. God has moved the family from one place to another, trying to recover the original blessing and extend it further and further.
 - b. Illus: When I was in early high school, my dad told me, that as a Japanese-American, I need to always be grateful for the black community in the U.S. because of what they went through, and how we as Asian-Americans benefit from their struggle, that made a very lasting impact. I had never heard him say anything like that, and I hadn’t learned enough about American history yet. In a similar sense, when I learned about how Joseph suffered to reconcile and reunite his family, and also be a person who brought God’s blessing to the world around him, I was inspired. And when I learned about how the Jewish people struggled and suffered to be God’s light-bearers and hope-bearers, I was also moved. Then, I learned that those stories are related: The struggle to express our God-given human dignity and be the people God always wanted unites both parts of that continuing story!
8. Do you regularly give God thanks for giving us a family story? Why or why not?
9. How do we allow God to shape our hearts? The word ‘heart’ occurs five times here.
 - a. Seeking Him with all our heart = observing His testimonies (v.2)
 - b. Being upright of heart = keeping God’s statutes (v.7 – 8)
 - c. With all my heart I have sought You = Your word I have treasured in my heart (v.10 – 11)

- d. Enlarge my heart (v.32)
10. Why would God need to ‘enlarge’ our hearts? How does your heart need to be a little larger this week?
- a. Illus: The Grinch, in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, had a heart that was ‘three sizes too small.’ But when he stole all the presents in Who-ville, and heard the Who-ville people singing on Christmas morning anyway, his heart was enlarged! The x-ray machine lens that was on his heart showed his heart swelling and swelling up because he had never known that kind of goodness before.
 - b. Illus: Knowing that God calls me to bear His image enlarges my own heart towards myself. I’m reminded that my worth does not come from the things I’ve accomplished, or the pain I’ve suffered, or the mistakes I made. It comes from bearing God’s image and carrying His life in me. So even when I have to do something I don’t really like to do naturally, in my case, like babysitting little kids, I remember that God loves these kids, and I get to participate in His love for them. With God, no act of faith and love goes unnoticed or forgotten. This will all be remembered somehow, and God uses it to shape me, too.
 - c. Illus: Senator John McCain’s last words to Americans were touching, and paralleled the experience of having your heart enlarged: ‘Like most people, I have regrets. But I would not trade a day of my life, in good or bad times, for the best day of anyone else’s. I owe that satisfaction to the love of my family. No man ever had a more loving wife or children he was prouder of than I am of mine. And I owe it to America. To be connected to America’s causes -- liberty, equal justice, respect for the dignity of all people -- brings happiness more sublime than life’s fleeting pleasures. Our identities and sense of worth are not circumscribed but enlarged by serving good causes bigger than ourselves.’ The Psalm, though, says that God’s ways and God’s story and God’s purposes are the ultimate bigger cause than ourselves.
11. How does knowing God’s story and God’s commands enlarge our hearts?
- a. Memorizing a part of a biblical story might be a useful exercise. But it’s more ‘chewing’ on the story and to some degree seeing our world in a similar way, as a land outside of the garden of Eden, which God is seeking to redeem and make beautiful again. It’s being inspired by God’s goodness and the patterns in how God worked before with people.
12. Read the reflection below

Reflection: Enlarge My Heart

A Reflection on Growing

In J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* saga, the two hobbits Merry and Pippin get swept up from their humble homes in the Shire, into a grand adventure where the fate of their world hangs in the balance. Merry offered his stout courage and strength to the Riders of Rohan. He rode into battle with the warrior Eowyn, who had disguised herself as a man in order to fight in the battle. Together, they traded blows with the dreaded leader of the Nazgul, the Witch-King of Angmar. As the Witch-King advanced to crush Eowyn, Merry drew his sword – a sword crafted centuries ago for the very purpose of battling this very foe – and sliced through his leg. Eowyn, despite her broken shield arm, drove her sword into the shadowy space between his crown and mantle, defeating the Witch-King.¹

Eowyn, her sword arm crippled by the enchantments that protected the Witch-King’s body, and Merry, his right arm also numb and useless, returned to the ‘Houses of Healing’ in the city of Gondor. They joined the many who lay sickened with a strange malady – a malady which came from contact with the evil Nazgul. Even the wizard Gandalf was unable to stop many from dying. Fortunately, the king-to-be, Aragorn, came forward. He used the herbs of healing and a deep reservoir of spiritual strength to heal Eowyn and Merry.

When Aragorn and Gandalf departed from the room where Merry lay, Pippin joined him. They marveled at Aragorn and Gandalf. Pippin wondered aloud how they had come to know these fine and noble friends, who they have come to respect and love.

‘Was there ever any one like him?’ he said. ‘Except Gandalf, of course. I think they must be related...’

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, book 5, chapter 6

Pippin encouraged Merry to smoke his pipe and eat some food. Merry declined the food, then returned Pippin's sense of wonder at how their adventure had changed them.

'No,' said Merry. 'I can't. Not yet, at any rate. But at least, Pippin, we can now see them, and honour them. It is best to love first what you are fitted to love, I suppose: you must start somewhere and have some roots, and the soil of the Shire is deep. Still there are things deeper and higher; and not a gaffer could tend his garden in what he calls peace but for them, whether he knows about them or not. I am glad that I know about them, a little. But I don't know why I am talking like this. Where is that leaf? And get my pipe out of my pack, if it isn't broken.'²

Merry's reflection is poignant. The two hobbits started this adventure by trying to help their beloved hobbit-friends, Frodo and Sam. The adventure expanded into a quest to defend their beloved homeland, the Shire. They started with a simple affection for 'soil' and growing things. Their love had 'roots.' But, by knowing Aragorn, the rightful heir to the throne of men, and Gandalf, now greatest of wizards, they had grown more and more in their care for the wider world. They had met Dwarves, Elves, Ents, and Huorns, and realized the stakes of the struggle against Sauron. And they had grown in love – not love in a merely sentimental sense, but in its deepest sense, which expresses itself in the desire to pledge and give one's very life. 'It is best to love first what you are fitted to love.' But through their personal contact with others, who were themselves of noble character and love, Merry and Pippin grew in their love for 'things deeper and higher.'

In Real Life, Too

I came to love God and others that way. Before I knew about Jesus, I understood love in my limited, human way. But as I saw the limitations of human love, including my own, I also watched Christians worship Jesus, and love Jesus, and love others. That made an impact on me. I opened up to Jesus' love. Then, by watching Jesus love his Father by the Spirit, I learned to know and love the Father, too. We must start somewhere and have roots. But there are 'things deeper and higher.'

I've also seen a deeply traumatized woman be transformed by love: love for her child. In order to be a stable mother, she entered a drug treatment program and beat her habit. She went to anger management classes and grew in patience. She sought regular counsel instead of living a fiercely private life. And she opened herself up to Jesus. Because of love, she grew as a person.

God Will Enlarge Our Hearts

God designed us to grow through love. He meant for us to love others and the world in the appropriate and ever-deepening way. The Psalmist says:

'I shall run the way of Your commandments,
For You will enlarge my heart.' (Psalm 119:32)

The Psalmist describes the impact of obeying and internalizing God's word as revealed in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). God gave commandments to Israel, when He appeared in divine fire on Mount Sinai (Ex.19). But God's commandments are not for His sake. They are for our sake. God designed human beings in such a way that when we listen to God's word and obey Him, something positive happens within us. Our hearts are enlarged.

The Psalmist also wants to internalize the biblical story in which God narrates His commandments. The Psalmist speaks of God's 'testimonies' and 'ways' (Ps.119:14 – 15, 24, 31, 36, etc.), which constitute the biblical story of God. God's story begins in Genesis (see the NHI small group leader notes!) with His desire for gardening partners. And after much heartbreak and sorrow, God develops Joseph as His ultimate gardening partner. Even in exile, Joseph makes Egypt flourish like the garden of Eden. Together, Joseph and God feed a multitude. The saga of Genesis certainly enlarges the heart.

We participate in God's love simply because we are made in His image (Gen.1:26 – 28). But God calls us to grow in His love, as the Psalmist says time after time. We are to receive His word more deeply into our hearts (Ps.119:10 – 12, 26, 33, 64, 66 – 68, 73, 124, 135, 171).

² Ibid, book 5, chapter 8

Jesus' Human Heart

Jesus of Nazareth is the only human being who has successfully saturated his human heart with God's word, in terms of both God's commandments and God's story. It may even be that the human author of Psalm 119 voiced it intentionally from the Messiah's perspective. After all, who else could reasonably say, 'I have more insight than all my teachers' (Ps.119:99)? Regardless, Jesus made the Psalm his own.

Jesus was faithful to receive God's word into himself, and he fulfilled the Sinai covenant, including this aspect (Mt.5:17 – 20; Rom.10:4). He is the true Israelite, who did for Israel, and for us, what we could not: He enlarged his heart, by the Spirit, to fully contain the love of the Father for the whole world, and love for the Father from every part of his humanity.

Jesus accomplished a medical miracle, as our medical substitute: He permanently changed human nature, by healing his human nature in partnership with God.

When we have faith in Jesus, we participate by his Spirit in his humanity and his faithfulness. So participation in him means progress in us. We look to Jesus, and ask him for help to internalize the whole biblical story and his teachings. We ask him, 'Enlarge my heart.'

Of course, 'it is best to love first what you are fitted to love.' But we are also meant to far outgrow our little plot of soil, and our home town. Through our personal contact with Jesus, and others who love him, we grow in love for things 'deeper and higher.'