

Preface

When I first began preaching Psalm 119 in late 2019, I had no anticipation of turning sermons into a book. Although I preach in many different churches rather than from a single pulpit, I ordinarily preach series from a book of Scripture. Even if congregations do not hear the whole series, at least it is helpful for me to preach in this way. I began preaching in Psalm 119 for two basic reasons. The first was that I was beginning work on a big project that would include an extended study of God's law, and spending some focused time on Psalm 119 was obviously relevant for that study. The second was that although I had read Psalm 119 countless times I had never felt that the psalm, as a whole, had really clicked in my mind. I had pondered how particular stanzas fit together, with partial satisfaction, but I was not clear at all on how the psalm cohered as a whole. Doing some preaching on the Long Psalm would be a good occasion, I hoped, to gain some greater clarity on this issue.

I had no commitment to preach through the entire psalm, and I did not know at the time how far I would get. As it turned out, I preached through all of Psalm 119, taking two stanzas at a time. I enjoyed doing so immensely and learned a great deal along the way. Still, presenting these sermons in a book

was not at all an obvious thing to do. I have written and edited many books, but never one like this. Two strong considerations argued against it, in my mind.

The first is the nature of preaching itself, at least from my perspective. Preaching is a mode of oral communication in which a preacher ordained by Christ through his church proclaims God's word to his assembled covenant people, especially on the Lord's Day. Oral communication is simply not the same as written communication. The dynamic encounter between God's preached word and his assembled people is different from sitting in a chair and reading. In a sermon, a preacher who has researched, reflected, and prayed over a text of Scripture opens his heart to the hearts of the congregation. If that is the case, any sermon reduced to the written word loses something important. This loss seemed all the more substantial to me since I do not write my sermons in a manuscript but preach them from a fairly brief outline. In short, I am somewhat skeptical about *reading* sermons in the first place, and in any case I had no written sermons on Psalm 119 to work with.

The second consideration against turning my sermons on Psalm 119 into a book was the fact that I have no illusions that these sermons are somehow among the upper echelon of sermons preached and thus ought to be distributed more broadly than to the often-small congregations to which I preached them. I gave considerable thought to these sermons, but working on Psalm 119 was never my primary endeavor in life. I prepared and preached these sermons amidst many other responsibilities, some of which demanded much more of my time and energy than Psalm 119 did.

And yet the fact that you are reading this means that I have turned these sermons into a short book, despite these obstacles. With respect to my second hesitation above, perhaps the best

I can say is that I thoroughly enjoyed working through Psalm 119, learned a great deal, was blessed by it, and find some satisfaction in sharing what I have learned with others. As I preached these texts in dozens of churches, I heard many stories about how ordinary Christians read and study Psalm 119. People I did not know approached me after services and told me that they read and meditate on a verse in Psalm 119 every morning. Others have told me about Bible studies in which they explored all the terms for God's word that Psalm 119 uses. One person told me about how he memorized (almost) the whole of Psalm 119 while in prison. Many Christians love Psalm 119 and want to learn more about it.

And this leads to a second reason why I decided to turn these sermons into a book: there does not seem to be a crowded field of thorough studies of Psalm 119 that treat the Great Psalm as a coherent, logically organized, Christ-centered poem written by a godly and brilliant poet who adhered to a thoroughly old covenant religious faith yet eagerly expected the greater things of the new covenant and new creation. There are older collections of sermons on Psalm 119, some much longer than the present volume, but they tend to treat Psalm 119 as 176 individual pious statements rather than as a single, interconnected poem. Expounding Psalm 119 in this way can undoubtedly be edifying, but it is not the way my sermons treat Psalm 119, nor do I think it is the best way to treat it. Furthermore, the past several years have afforded me numerous opportunities to talk to pastors about Psalm 119, and although many have told me that they have preached a few stanzas of Psalm 119 or aspire to preach the psalm someday, I cannot recall any pastor telling me that he had preached through the whole of the psalm. So, perhaps the sermons in this volume can provide a resource that is not abundantly available. They may be able to help ordinary Bible-loving Christians who like studying Psalm 119 and want

to learn more, and they may be able to stimulate pastors who would like to preach Psalm 119 but have not been sure how to do so. I want to be clear that I would not expect any pastor to preach these texts in the same way I have. But if my sermons can provide any motivation or insight for preaching Psalm 119, I would be very grateful for that.

With respect to my first hesitation described above, there is ultimately no way around the fact that hearing a sermon in the assembly of God's covenant people is not the same as reading a book, even if precisely the same words are spoken/written in each case. But there is a long Christian tradition of preserving and distributing sermons in written form, and just because two things are not the same does not mean both cannot be edifying. In creating this book, I have tried to be generally faithful to the words I spoke in particular sermons, to the degree that seemed possible and readable. I used an automated transcription service to provide transcripts of sermons recorded by churches where I preached. I then edited these transcripts. In part, I had to edit the mistakes in the transcript. For example, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet is Aleph, not Olive, as some transcriptions thought, and I often referred to "our psalmist" but never to "Osama." I also tried to delete quirks and to smooth out rough spots that I suppose are inevitable in oral communication when one is speaking extemporaneously rather than reading a manuscript. But the following chapters are close to my real-life sermons.

I also resisted the temptation to improve the earlier sermons in light of what I learned as I worked my way through subsequent stanzas of Psalm 119. Perhaps I could have made these sermons a bit better, but I did not for two main reasons. For one thing, if I was going to produce this book, I wanted to fill it with real sermons, along the lines of what I wrote just above. If I tried to improve them by revising the transcripts,

they would turn into something else. Moreover, it is a common experience for preachers to look back at sermons they preached at the beginning of a series, from the vantage point of the end of the series, and recognize certain deficiencies. How couldn't a preacher who studies and reflects seriously on a book of Scripture understand its first chapter better after preaching through the entire book than when he preached that first chapter months or years earlier? Sermons are not the sorts of things preachers endlessly tinker with. They preach sermons and move on. My decision not to try to improve the earlier sermons in light of the latter will give these sermons, I believe, a more authentic feel than would otherwise be the case, and I hope readers will appreciate that. As they read from earlier to later sermons, readers may perceive the development and maturing of my own thought about this psalm.

The final sermon in this book, however, is a recap of the entire psalm. In that sermon, I bring out some themes and emphases in earlier stanzas that were underdeveloped in the sermons that focused on those stanzas. When preaching that last sermon, I had a greater sense of what Psalm 119 as a whole is about than I had when I began preaching it.

Since what follow are sermons, I include no footnotes or other references to resources that have helped me along the way. So I mention two here for which I am especially grateful. Hywel Jones, my friend and former colleague at Westminster Seminary California, preached chapel sermons on Psalm 119 many years ago and subsequently wrote *Psalm 119 for Life* (Evangelical Press, 2009). I am thankful for how his sermons and book stimulated my thinking about the Great Psalm. Among academic resources, I found Will Soll's *Psalm 119: Matrix, Form, and Setting* (Catholic Biblical Association, 1991) to be especially helpful for understanding the themes of stanzas and the development of themes through the psalm as a whole.

I do not read sermons often, but I have been told that many authors of books of sermons tell readers that they have only published the sermons because people have urged them to do so for the good of the kingdom. No one urged me to publish these sermons for the good of the kingdom, so I cannot blame anyone else if readers find them unedifying. But I do thank my son, Jack, for giving me a good idea. I had originally toyed with writing a short book (from scratch) on what I learned about Psalm 119, but did not know how I would find time to do this in the near future given my many other commitments. Jack suggested that I simply publish the sermons. I decided that was indeed the best route, so I am grateful to him for suggesting it.

I am also thankful to the many churches who invited me to preach and listened to these sermons and received them graciously. I used recordings (without asking) from three congregations—Escondido Orthodox Presbyterian Church (Escondido, CA), Christ United Reformed Church (Anaheim, CA), and Westminster Orthodox Presbyterian Church (Westminster, CA)—and so I thank these churches too for their accessible and up-to-date sermon archives. Escondido OPC and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Los Angeles were the only churches where I preached all twelve of these sermons. I am truly grateful for the mysterious fellowship that preacher and congregation enjoy in the ministry of God's word.

Holistic Obedience

Psalm 119:1-16

In the first major section of the Epistle to the Romans, from approximately the middle of chapter 1 to the middle of chapter 3, Paul laid the foundation for his great teaching on the doctrine of salvation by describing the sinfulness of the entire human race, Jew and Gentile alike. Amid that discussion, you may remember, Paul spoke about the Jewish people of his day. He said that they considered the law of Moses to be “the embodiment of knowledge and truth.” In his larger argument in Romans 2, Paul exposed these people’s sins. But he did not condemn them for thinking this about the law. He condemned them for not acting as though it is true. He condemned them for not obeying this law. They were right to view the law of God as the embodiment of knowledge and truth.

That is an interesting way to put it, isn’t it? The *embodiment*—or the shape or form—of truth. This does not mean that the Mosaic law itself reveals all truth that can be known. But it does say that the law of Moses in some special and powerful

way summed up the truth that God's people really needed to know.

Now we might wonder where the Jewish people of Paul's day got that idea. One very plausible answer to that question is Psalm 119.

Psalm 119 stands out. It is a well-known psalm for many reasons. One reason, of course, is because it is so long. There is a reason it is called the "Long Psalm" or the "Great Psalm." It is the single longest chapter in Scripture. Psalm 119 is also notable because it is an acrostic poem, which means that the Hebrew alphabet provides its structure. It has twenty-two stanzas, matching the Hebrew alphabet's twenty-two letters. Thus, in the first stanza, the first letter of every verse is the Hebrew letter Aleph, the first letter of that alphabet. In the second stanza, the first letter of every verse is the Hebrew letter Beth, the second letter of the alphabet. And so on.

But another interesting thing about this psalm is its focus upon God's law. Read the whole of Psalm 119—long as it is—and you will not find anything about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You also will not find any mention of the exodus from Egypt, the covenants, the temple in Jerusalem, or the throne of David. Those are all important themes in the Old Testament, yet they do not appear in Psalm 119. Instead, Psalm 119 keeps talking about the law. This psalm has a stock of Hebrew terms for referring to the law that it uses over and over. Almost every verse uses one of these terms. The law of God certainly does shine forth as the embodiment of knowledge and truth in Psalm 119.

But please keep one thing in mind as you meditate on Psalm 119. We often think of "the law" merely as God's commandments, in distinction from "the gospel" which proclaims God's promises of salvation in Christ. That is indeed an important theological distinction. But "the law" can also

refer to the opening section of Scripture—that is, the first five books of the Old Testament. And these books—Genesis through Deuteronomy—contain more than commandments. They also have stories of God’s faithfulness, prophecies of God’s future grace, and the like. This is why those terms that appear repeatedly in Psalm 119 include “way,” “promise,” and simply “word.” “The law” in this sense reveals all sorts of “knowledge and truth,” not just information about rules to obey.

We consider here the first two stanzas—Aleph and Beth. These opening stanzas teach that the law of God requires comprehensive obedience and a holistic devotion on the part of God’s people. We look first at the opening stanza, verses 1-8.

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Verses 1-2 raise a crucial question: How are God’s people blessed? Notice how both verses begin: “Blessed are those.... Blessed are those....” These two consecutive verses begin in the same way. We do not find this elsewhere in Psalm 119. And nothing is more important than being blessed by God.

How do God’s people receive blessing from their Lord? These opening verses provide a simple and clear answer. God’s people are blessed through walking in the law of the Lord and by keeping his testimonies. That is, God’s people are blessed by adhering to God’s word.

Yet this straightforward answer needs some embellishment. In fact, verses 1-4 show that there is more to it than this. For one thing, these opening verses show that blessing comes not through obeying God’s law in a vague or general sense but through a comprehensive and thorough obedience. We see this in each of the first four verses. Verse 1: “Blessed are those whose way is *blameless*.” No blame at all. Verse 2: “Blessed are those...who seek him *with their whole heart*.” Not with half their heart, but with all of it. Verse 3: “Who also do *no* wrong.”