



The Great Psalm

SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Psalm 119:1-176

KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION

“For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven.
Thy faithfulness is unto all generations: thou hast
established the earth, and it abideth.”
(Psalm 119:89-90)

BACKGROUND

Psalm 119, often referred to as “The Great Psalm,” is the longest chapter in the Bible; it contains 176 verses. The author is unknown, but most Bible scholars credit it either to David or the prophet Jeremiah, based upon textual references to kings, reproach, enemies, etc. Dating the psalm’s composition to the time of the Babylonian captivity would point toward Jeremiah as the author; however, the context allows for an earlier date as well, making David’s authorship a possibility that must also be considered.

In the original Hebrew, Psalm 119 is presented in the form of an acrostic, or alphabetical writing. While it is one of several acrostics in the Book of Psalms (others are Psalms 9 and 10 combined, along with Psalms 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and 145), this is the longest and most intricate of these compositions. There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and Psalm 119 is divided into twenty-two, eight-verse sections. Each of these twenty-two sections is prefaced with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In the original Hebrew, that letter begins the first word of each of the eight verses within the section.

The clear theme of Psalm 119 is the Law of the Lord and its vital ministry in the spiritual life of believers. The word translated *law* is *torah*—a word which has a much broader meaning in Hebrew than in English. It refers to the will of God as it was made known to Israel, and has the sense of “teaching” or “instruction.” A unique feature of this psalm is that all but a very few of the verses contain at least one reference to the Law of the Lord. The multifaceted manner in which the truths regarding God’s instruction are presented reflects the importance of integrating Scripture into every part of life and community.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

- 1. What words describing the Law of the Lord are used in the first section, titled Aleph? (Psalm 119:1-8)**

The words describing the Law of the Lord used in these eight verses are “law,” “testimonies,”

OPENER

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NOTES

“ways,” “precepts,” “statutes,” “commandments,” “judgments,” and “statutes” (again).

It may be interesting to review with your class the slightly different shades of meaning for each of these synonyms. Law (torah) has to do with instruction by God about how to live to please Him. Testimony refers to the fact that the Hebrews were the people who received God’s covenant promises; God’s testimony/ covenant is sure toward His chosen people. Precept/ statute is the teaching of God through the covenant and is to be obeyed and guarded. Commandment indicates not only an order to be obeyed but implies the authority of the one giving the command, in this case, God. Way has a sense of a course of action. Judgment refers to the justice meted out by God concerning human behavior. Statute (a different Hebrew word than the one translated precept/statute above) indicates a divine decree by the Sovereign Lord of the universe.

In the remaining verses of Psalm 119, we find two uses of word to indicate the commandments of God. The first usage (as in verse 9) simply refers to a divine utterance or speech proceeding from the mouth of God. As used in verse 11, word means not only an utterance but also a promise or commitment made by the one speaking. One further word referring to God’s Law, translated ordinances, is used in verse 91.

2. In Psalm 119:2, the psalmist stated that those who seek God with their “whole heart” will be blessed. Contemporary thinking views the heart as the seat of emotions. However, in the Bible the word *heart* is a far more comprehensive term which encompasses three key aspects of who we are: the intellect, the emotions, and the will. Given that description, what do you think embracing the Word with our “whole heart” might look like in everyday life?

As your students offer their thoughts about how a wholehearted embrace of the Word might be lived out in our daily lives, they will likely point to attributes such as faithfulness, integrity, hunger for God, putting God first in our priorities, dedication, zeal, etc.

You may wish to point out that the phrase “whole heart” also occurs in verses 10, 34, 58, 69, and 145; in these, seeking God and obeying His Word is the key message. Verse 32 gives a hint of how this is possible: “I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart.” When we choose to wholeheartedly embrace the Word and keep the commandments of the Lord, God provides an enlarging of our hearts, giving us an increased capacity and ability to do so.

Depending upon the age and spiritual maturity of those in your class, it may be helpful to point out that seeking God with our whole hearts does not imply human perfection. Even when our hearts are wholly fixed upon Him, there is a process of spiritual growth and maturing that takes place. We can still make errors

in judgment, but God sees that the intent of our hearts is perfect before Him.

You may wish to follow up this discussion by asking your group for specific examples of those in Bible times or the history of Christianity who gave their “whole heart” to the Lord.

3. In Psalm 119:11, the psalmist stated, “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.” How will hiding the Word in our hearts help us not to sin?

Class discussion should bring out that Jesus himself showed how having the Word in our hearts will help us not to sin—when Satan tempted Him, He used the Word to resist the enemy. Matthew Henry says of this verse: “Good men are afraid of sin, and are in care to prevent it; and the most effectual way to prevent is to hide God’s Word in our hearts, that we may answer every temptation, as our Master did, with, ‘It is written...’”

Based on the point developed in the preceding question, you may also wish to point out that it is with our hearts that we think, intend, know, understand, purpose, and believe. Proverbs 4:23 says that out of the heart “are the issues of life.” If God’s Word is hidden in our hearts, the issues of our lives are going to be affected—since Scripture directs us away from sin, the issues of our lives will also be directed away from sin.

4. During the period of history when the psalms were composed, history and religious traditions were passed on orally. For this reason, devotional truths were often presented through music (as with many of the psalms) or as an acrostic (as with Psalm 119), as these methods promoted memorization and retention of God’s Word among the Hebrew people. What are some strategies that can help us memorize passages from the Bible?

It may be helpful to generate a list of the suggestions made by your class members. Ideas may include:

- *Listen to Scripture as you commute or engage in other tasks that do not require mental focus.*
- *Use an app designed to help with memorization.*
- *Sing songs based upon Scripture.*
- *Post the verse on your refrigerator, mirror, or dashboard—somewhere you will see it often. Read or say it aloud each time you see it.*
- *Take a screen shot of a Bible verse and use it as your lock screen. Each time you see the verse, say it to yourself.*
- *Text the verse to your friends. The act of typing it out and reading it over to make sure it is correct will impress it into your mind.*
- *Say the verse out loud.*
- *Set aside a specific time on a regular basis that you will devote to Scripture memorization.*
- *Pray that God will help you!*

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