

The Blessing of Obedience

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. It's a great pleasure to have you with us, whether you're in the church or watching or listening online. Before we get into Psalm 119, I want to recognise two of our longest standing church members, Charlie and Nan Miller, who this weekend are moving to be near their daughter Avril in Bishop Riggs.

For many years, Charlie was our organist at this service, The Breaking of Bread and others. You'd often find him up here speaking or leading services or baptising people. They were always the first at the church every Sunday morning so that Nan and Audrey McMillan could set things up for tea and coffee between the services and involved in lots of other areas, including building maintenance and coffee mornings.

Nan and Charlie haven't been able to be with us for a while now because of their health, but we're thankful to the Lord for all they've done and been in our church over the years. And we wish them God's rich blessing in their new home.

They will be watching, I think, this morning. Now, let's look at Psalm 119, and it is a great joy to be speaking on this passage.

For the last few weeks, we've been looking at the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. It's been very important teaching, but at the same time, it's been quite difficult and challenging.

[1 : 23] Jesus was talking about the law and our attitude to that. And it's great that we're coming straight from that to Psalm 119 because the subject matter there is exactly the same, but the perspective is quite different.

Let me try to explain it with some examples. Jesus was talking to people in this day who were used to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees and how they viewed God's word.

And they came to it as lawyers. They said, let's look in exact detail of what the words say and make sure we obey the letter of the law. But then they were thinking, well, we can find excuses to do things we want to that are not outside the letter of the law, even though they might not be exactly what people would expect.

They had the attitude of a lawyer. Let's just look at the words and do that and no more. Jesus said to those who are listening to him, your attitude should be that of a disciple.

You are my disciples. He was speaking largely to his followers. And you are to follow my example. And you are to see the law not as a huge heavy burden, not as something that you are to obey just to the letter, but as something that is given to you by your loving Heavenly Father for your good.

[2 : 51] And you should look not just at the letter, but at the spirit of the law. It doesn't just affect what you do. It affects what you say.

It affects what you think. It affects your attitude to others. If you're my disciples, your spirituality, your righteousness should be greater than those who just look at the letter of the law.

Now we're coming to Psalm 119. And I suggest the attitude of the psalmist is more that of a fan. He's an enthusiast for the law.

Now imagine a famous pop star, let's say Taylor Swift, and they bring out a new album. And their fans, as soon as they can, are wanting to listen to the music.

And they'll say things like, I can really identify with the emotions in that song. Or that's a really powerful lyric. It speaks to me.

[3 : 53] Or what a beautiful picture she's painting there. And that's the kind of attitude that the psalmist has. He loves God's word.

He loves the law. And he wants to do everything he can to obey it. Now that doesn't mean he's got his head in the clouds and he's kind of sitting above all the problems of this world.

We'll see as we go through, I think starting with Graham next week. The psalmist had many enemies and those who would want to do him down. And he recognised that. But he saw God's word, God's law, as being something that could sustain him and help him through that. So we come to a chapter of the Bible, the longest chapter in the whole Bible, that really is an exciting exposition of why God's law is a wonderful thing that we should cherish and we should obey.

Now we'll come in a minute to the message. But I think since this is the first in the series, maybe I could spend a couple of minutes talking about this psalm as literature.

[5 : 02] It's very good poetry. And I would say actually it's a literary masterpiece. Let me explain why. First thing I've called alphabetisation.

That's a bit of a mouthful. All it means is something that's been put into alphabetical order. So if you have the psalm in front of you, you'll see it's divided into lots of sections, 22 of them in all.

And at the top of each of them, there's likely to be a symbol and a word. And the symbol and the word are letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Aleph, Bet, Gimel, and so on.

So each section of the psalm is based on a Hebrew letter. And I think in that, the psalmist is saying to us, this is something that is complete about God's word.

If you like, it's the A to Z of God's word of the law. He wants to bring out as many as he can of the features of the law and of the things that we should treasure in it.

[6 : 04] But there's more than that. There is also alliteration. Alliteration is when you start words with the same initial letter. So we could say Psalm 119 is a perfect poem of praise.

And the most remarkable thing about this psalm is that in every section, all 22 of them, there are eight verses. And each verse in that section begins with the letter that's at the top.

So the first eight verses in the Hebrew all begin with the letter Aleph, the second eight with the second letter Bet, and so on. And that, to me, is a most remarkable achievement.

Some of you know that I'm quite fond of alliteration, and it can be quite difficult to get it right. A few years ago, a church member said to me, I really like it when you speak, Ian, because I learn new words.

It's good to have some educational value, I suppose. But I think what he meant was, when you're trying to use alliteration to help people remember points, you might have three points that fairly naturally begin with the letter S, and then the fourth one doesn't so easily.

[7 : 11] And you search through the thesaurus and find, yes, here's a word that will just about fit. And it might not be a common everyday word, like alphabetisation. So it's not always very straightforward.

The great thing with Psalm 119 is you have no sense of strain in the alliteration. Now, it doesn't come out in English, but if you just look at the flow of the verses, in each section, the verses flow perfectly together, despite the constraint the psalmist has of starting with the same letter.

If you just imagine in English, if you were writing something and you wanted eight verses that started with K, or with X, or with Z, or something like that, it is a really difficult job.

I think what the psalmist is trying to get across here is a sense of order. In the midst of a chaotic world, in the midst of the chaos that his enemies would like to cause for him, he's saying God's word brings us order.

And in the style of Hebrew poetry in each verse as well, you have two lines, and the second line either repeats the first line slightly differently, or maybe expands on it, or brings out a contrast.

[8 : 27] But there is order, there is pattern, and the psalmist is saying here is something we can rely on in a constantly changing world. God's word stands, and it stands in a really orderly way.

He uses alliteration to great effect. And then finally, I didn't quite manage to get my alliteration today, but the third word I've used is illustration.

Not so much in today's passage, but as you go through the psalm, he compares God's word to quite a number of things. He says, It's sweeter to my lips than honey.

It's a path I can run along. It's a lamp for my feet, and a light for my path. It's more precious than gold and silver.

And these illustrations, these pictures of the psalmist paints for us, help us to understand more just why he loves God's word so much, why it is so precious to him.

[9 : 30] So it's a great work of literature. But of course, the important thing is what does God want to say to us through it? And one more thing before we come to look at today's passage.

There are eight words that are repeated constantly throughout the psalm in the Hebrew. Almost every verse has at least one of them. Now, unhelpfully, most English translations translate two of the Hebrew words as word, and verses 9 and 11 are the first occurrences.

In the NIV, the others are translated law, statutes, precepts, decrees, commands, and laws. Now, these words obviously all have similar meanings.

Future speakers may go into more detail about the shades of difference between them. But let me just highlight the first one, the word law. That in Hebrew is Torah.

And you may know that the Torah, in the technical sense, is the first five books of the Old Testament, the books of the law. But I think in this, in using law and all the other words, the psalmist is going beyond just what is written down.

[10:43] That is the key way in which God speaks to us. But the psalmist is looking at all ways in which God reveals his will to us and points us in the right direction.

Primarily through his word, but also through what we might call the natural laws, that we have a conscience, even people haven't any knowledge of God or of the Bible.

There is some understanding of right and wrong. And then there's God speaking into our individual situations. And at times we have a real sense that God is leading us in a particular direction, consistent with his word, but leading us in a particular direction, and we need to follow it.

And I think these words encompass all of these ideas. Otherwise, I'm going to focus particularly on how they apply to Scripture, but bear in mind that there could be a wider application.

Okay, let's get stuck into today's passage then. There are two sections, Aleph and Bet. As I said, each of them has eight verses. And I'm going to call the first section, the path of obedience.

[11:51] The psalmist is thinking, how can I enjoy God's blessing? And I'm longing to be the kind of person who really obeys God.

So it begins in verses one and two, if you've got them in front of you, with the word blessed or blessed. Now that's the same word that's used right at the beginning of the book of Psalms in a similar context of the person who walks in God's way.

It's also, of course, the same word in English as the Lord Jesus used in the Beatitudes when he presented the Christian counterculture that he was bringing out.

And he said, you're really blessed if you follow in these ways, if you have these kinds of attitudes.

Being blessed refers to having a real deep-rooted joy, not necessarily happiness, a real deep-rooted joy, and a satisfaction as you enjoy walking in God's way.

But look how high the standard is that the psalmist sets. Verse one, we're to walk according to the law of the Lord. Verse two, we're to seek him with all our heart.

[13:03] Verse three, we're to do no wrong. Verse four, we're to fully obey his precepts. That's a really high standard. And we may look at it and think, how can I possibly achieve that?

Well, in one sense, we can't. Only Jesus was able fully to obey God's law. But that doesn't mean that we can't long for it and use God's word as the basis for living our lives.

And that's what the psalmist expresses in verses five to eight. He looks at himself and he feels he doesn't yet match the person he's describing in verses one to four.

He's not achieved the standard that he would set himself, and he's concerned he could be put to shame and could even be forsaken by God. I wonder if you ever feel like that.

There are some people you meet who just seem to ooze holiness. Not because they tell you how good they are, they definitely don't do that. But you can sense in them a real closeness to God, a humility, a gentleness, an evident spirituality.

[14:14] They'd be the first to tell you that they're still sinners like us. But in them, there's a Christ-likeness that many of us can only aspire to.

And that may make us almost despair, as the psalmist is beginning to do here, at our own lack of holiness, at our own lack of devotion to God and to his word.

Well, the good news is that if we truly seek God through his word, we don't need to be ashamed, and we certainly don't need to worry he could forsake us.

The writer to the Hebrews says that God rewards those who earnestly seek him. And he's made a way for us to find forgiveness through Jesus, through his death on the cross, and then through the Holy Spirit, we can learn God's way.

We can be enabled to live in the way that the Lord Jesus lived to the extent that we can. We can be given the strength to obey, and we know that God never gives up on us.

[15:16] Even though we fail time and time again, if we are really seeking God, if our trust is really in the Lord Jesus, he will welcome us back, and he will help us to live the way that we should.

So we should be looking for the blessings of obedience. We should be longing to be obedient to God's word. But we need to recognize we don't do that in our own strength.

We do it as we come to know the Lord Jesus better, and to live in the way that he lived. Let's move on to the second of the two sections.

I'm going to spend a little bit longer on this one. I've called it the pursuit of obedience. And the key verse here to understand where we're going is verse 9, where the psalmist says, how can a young person stay on the path of purity by living according to your word?

Now, it says young person equally would apply to those of us who are older. And in the following seven verses, the psalmist tells us seven things that we should be seeking to do so that we can be obedient to God's law.

[16:32] So that we can walk in the path of purity he talks about. So let's just very quickly go through these verses and learn from them.

In verse 10, the psalmist says, I seek you with all my heart. Do not let me stray from your commands. So the first thing when we come to our Bibles, when we come to God's word, is that we need to be seeking for God.

At one level, reading the Bible is very good in itself. A daily habit of reading the Bible is very important for Christians, but it's not just so we can tick a box and say, I did my devotion today.

We need to come to God's word, looking for God to speak to us and looking to build our relationship with him. Letting him reveal himself through his word and then going on to obey it.

We should be looking for Christ, the Lord Jesus, in all the scriptures as they increase our understanding of who he is and what he's done. And as we seek for God, then we will find him and we'll be given the strength, says the psalmist, not to stray from God's command.

[17:51] We come to the Bible seeking to know our God better and to become more like him. Then in verse 11, the psalmist says, I've hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

I think this refers to memorizing the Bible verses. When we learn the Bible and learn verses and passages, they give us our best weapon when we face temptation to sin.

Paul describes it as the sword of the spirit. It's the weapon that Jesus used three times when he was tempted by the devil. I look back to when I was a boy and I remember two passages in particular that we learned then.

One of them, our father got me and my sisters to learn. It was the opening verses of John chapter 14. And here at church, our Bible class leader, Jim McDowell, got us learning Isaiah chapter 53. And these two passages have stayed with me throughout the years. I could still, I think, recite them in the authorised version that we learned them in. And they're such precious scriptures, such precious teaching from the Bible.

[19:10] And I'm so grateful that we were taught them. I just wish I'd learned more of the Bible when I was young. I learned lots of memory verses, willing enough to recite them back to the teacher on a Sunday morning, but they didn't really sink in.

And it's much more difficult to learn as you grow older. I'd encourage everybody, particularly young people, but everyone to spend time memorizing key scriptures.

So that you know your Bible, not just when you read it, but actually you can think about it, you can meditate on it at any time. And when the time of temptation or trial comes, you'll be given the strength to be victorious over sin.

We should memorize the scriptures. Verse 12 says, teach me your decrees. I think this is bringing out the value of studying God's word, of making a real effort to understand it.

Some parts of the Bible are really straightforward, and we can understand them very easily. Paul says to the jailer in Philippi, believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

[20:27] That's simple. That's the gospel in a nutshell. It's unambiguous. Salvation, forgiveness for sin, comes only through faith in Jesus.

But many parts of the Bible are really quite difficult to understand. People spend years studying them and maybe never get to the bottom of them.

But we need to have that desire to study God's word and to really understand it. Understand the context in which it was written. Sometimes the words in the original Hebrew or Greek have shades of meaning that don't really come out in English translations.

Or there are passages we might not understand properly if we don't look at them in the light of other parts of Scripture that are maybe more straightforward. Now, in many ways, studying the Bible these days is easier than it's ever been in the past.

There are so many resources available to us. But we need to be careful. I use EI quite a lot and it can be enormously helpful, but we mustn't accept it unquestioningly because it can easily mislead us.

[21 : 35] It is not a person, it's not someone who knows Jesus telling us it's a computer bringing together lots of different sources. Commentaries can also be very helpful in bringing out the truth, but can also lead us into error.

So be careful what commentaries you read. Make sure they have a high view of Scripture and ask Graham or myself or others if you want some recommendations. Even when you hear teaching at church, I hope all the teaching that we give you is sound and biblical, but it's good to be like the Bereans in the book of Acts who heard Paul preaching and then went away and searched the Scriptures to see whether what he said was true.

And hopefully if you search the Scriptures, it will confirm that what you hear here is the truth. But above all, we need to ask God to teach us. Commentaries, computers, people who have studied the Bible, they're all very helpful.

But ultimately it's God who will lead us into truth. Or to quote from Jesus, that it is the Holy Spirit whom Jesus has given us who will lead us into all truth.

He'll take the Bible and he'll apply it in our lives. So we need to study the Scripture. Fourth thing is we need to speak it.

[22 : 59] With my lips, I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. Verse 13. The psalmist said in verse 11 that he hid God's word in his heart, but it didn't mean he was hiding it from others.

He meant he was storing it there. And he says it's good to use our lips to talk about God's laws. Speaking the word to one another is really important.

Paul says in both Ephesians and Colossians that we should speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. And the best Christian songs are very solidly based on Scripture and can help us all in our understanding and help us to encourage each other in our walk with God.

Alongside that, a good number of people in the church meet one-to-one to read the Bible and to study it together. We discuss it together in our growth groups. And in everyday conversation, whether it's with our Christian friends or with those who are not yet Christians, there are opportunities to talk about the Bible, but we can obviously only do that if we know it for ourselves. So do when you're talking to one another, where appropriate, remind each other of what the Bible says. And when you're talking to those who are not yet Christians, don't be afraid to present God's Word to them.

[24 : 25] It is sharp, it's powerful, it is able to change their lives. We're getting there, number five, verse 14.

We should treasure God's law. Psalmist says, I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.

The psalmist will return time and time again to how much he values God's Word. It brings him great joy because it enables him to walk in God's ways and nothing can bring greater joy and satisfaction in life than that.

It's very easy for us to take our Bibles for granted. You don't even need to carry a physical Bible with you. Most of us probably have the Bible on our phones.

We can read it whenever and wherever we happen to be. But I wonder, do we, do I, really treasure it the way the psalmist did?

[25 : 28] And if we did, what kind of difference would that make to our lifestyles, to our attitudes, to our relationships, to our walk with God? This Word of God is the most precious book that's ever been written.

And we need to treasure it and value it and be so thankful that we have it in our own language and we can, anytime we want to, we can read it and refer to it.

Verse 15 then, the sixth of the psalmist's instructions or comments on how we can keep our ways pure before God is that we need to meditate.

I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. Now let's be clear of what we mean here. I looked up meditation on the internet and the suggested meaning was the practice of training your

attention and awareness to achieve a mentally clear, emotionally calm, and stable state. Then talked about things like mindfulness and body scanning, all sorts of others. That's not what the psalmist means here. Biblical meditation is about focusing our thoughts wholly on the Bible and of what God is saying to us through it.

[26 : 44] Perhaps a verse or a short passage of Scripture and we're saying to God, speak to me, help me to understand it, but particularly help me to apply it in my life.

We're not just to learn our Bibles by rote for the sake of it. We're not just to study it for intellectual stimulation. We're called to meditate on it, to let us change our lives, to shape our thoughts and our attitudes, our words, our actions.

How often do we read our Bibles and then forget about it as we go about our day? How often do we leave on Sunday morning, perhaps having enjoyed the service, but not really considering what God's Word has said to us and letting it change our lives?

Let's not rush our Bible reading. Let's take time to meditate on it, to consider God's ways and to think how we can follow in them.

And then finally, we need to prioritize God's Word. Verse 16, the psalmist says, I delight in your decrees, I will not neglect your word.

[27 : 56] In other words, I will prioritize my Bible. I wonder if that's true of us. Where does our Bible sit in our daily priorities?

Is it something we'll read if we have time? Maybe we'll skim through it and then get on with other things. Or is it the most important part of our day, along with spending time in prayer before and after we read, and something that we really, really don't want to miss and we know we want to give good time to?

Perhaps even more basic. Do we read our Bibles between coming to church on Sundays? Or some of us, if we come to church, that's our religious bit done for the week and we can go away and forget about it.

The psalmist says, I will not neglect your word. That should be true of us as well. So how can a young person or an older person stay in the path of purity?

By seeking, memorizing, studying, speaking, treasuring, meditating on and prioritizing God's word. Can I challenge you?

[29 : 11] Of these seven, which is the one you feel that you need to give most attention to? The one that perhaps you've neglected and haven't really done as you should.

The one that will make the most difference as you move forward in enabling you to become more the blameless and blessed person that the writer talks about in verse one.

Living according to God's law. I want to finish by telling you about William Macpherson. That's a good Scottish name and William was Scottish but he emigrated to the USA near the end of the 19th century.

He was a quarry worker and he rose to become the foreman, the superintendent in the quarry where he was. But one day he rather foolishly picked up a stick of dynamite that was live and it exploded.

It blew off his hands and it left him blind. A horrific accident. And William Macpherson ended up in a care home.

[30 : 22] And while he was there, the days obviously hang heavy, he had nothing that he could do in many ways but what he wanted to do more than anything else was to read his Bible.

But how could he do that? He was blind so he couldn't read it in the way most of us can. He had no hands so he couldn't use Braille in the way that many blind people do.

William Macpherson heard about a girl who was blind and who lost the sense in her hands and she read the Bible with her lips. She put her lips to it and that way to read her Bible.

But when he tried to do that, he found that the feeling in his face was gone and that didn't work either. But by accident, as he was doing that, his tongue slipped out and he realised that he could read or feel raised letters with his tongue by licking them.

And he thought, that's the way I can read God's Word. It was slow. It was very painful. A lot of bloodshed as he tried to read the raised metal letters.

[31 : 32] But he persisted at it. And he read right through the Bible letter by letter by letter over several years.

And then when he was finished, he went back and he started again. And then he did it again. And he did it a fourth time. Painstakingly reading God's Word and taking the time to learn it, to digest it, and to enjoy it.

I'm very challenged by that. It's the kind of love for God's law that the psalmist talks about, but is it the kind of love that I have?

It may well put us to shame as we think how perfunctory and superficial our reading of the Bible often is. It's so easy that we do it in just a short time and we forget about it.

And what a contrast to someone who's spending years and years painstaking reading through the Scriptures and really benefiting from it. So let's resolve today that we are going to give God's Word the attention it deserves.

[32 : 43] We're going to learn, we're going to study, we're going to meditate, we're going to speak about it to each other. And above all, we're going to seek to obey it and to make it the basis for our lives.

To have our faith in Christ as the Bible would teach us is the only way of salvation and to seek to follow in His ways and to be His disciples as we learn more of His will through His Word.

Let's pray together. Our Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You that we have this wonderful treasure that is in our language, in words we can understand, that we can read at any time we want.

We thank You that has so much to say to us, so much that will help us in our lives and particularly will help us to live the kind of life that You want us to.

We pray that You will help us to treasure it, to value it, and to make the most of it. That we won't take it for granted, but that we'll seek to find You in it, that we'll seek to see Jesus in all the Scriptures, and that we'll seek to become more like Him, to be His disciples.

[33 : 59] Help us this week to spend good time reading and meditating on Your Word. Thank You for Your presence this morning and we commit ourselves to You now in Jesus' name.

Amen. You