

021223 Sermon "God's presence through the Word" Psalms 119:1-8

Do you know what is the shortest chapter in the entire Bible? Psalm 117. It only has two verses. If you really want to read as many chapters as possible in a short amount of time, you can continue reading Psalm 117. While Psalm 119 is the longest chapter. It has 176 verses! Of course, today we only read the first 8 verses. An interesting thing is that among the 176 verses in this Psalm, with the exception of four verses (84, 90, 122, 132), all the other verses relate to the Law and the Word of God.

Christians today generally do not share the Psalms' tireless insistence on strict observance of the Law or the Torah. But ancient Israelites might have found this poem utterly compelling because it makes bold claims about how to live a happy life. "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways."

The introduction is strikingly similar to the first Psalm. "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night."

Psalm 119 praises and reflects on the relationship between the Word of God and the people of God. This first stanza begins by examining the relationship between the people of God and the Word of God for the glory of God.

Moreover, what is special about this Psalm is that Psalm 119 is so called an alphabetic acrostic poem, one of several poems of this type found in the Psalms. Each verse in this psalm typically begins with a successive letter in

the Hebrew alphabet. So, the first verse would begin with aleph, the second with bet, and so on until the poet reaches the end of the alphabet. The Hebrew alphabet consists of 22 letters, all consonants. As I said before, this psalm has 176 verses and each group of 8 verses start with the letter aleph, the next eight with bet, and so on, all the way through the Hebrew alphabet. Interesting, isn't it? Then why would the author bother to write a psalm this way?

The ancient Israelites had to learn the alphabet, just like we all did. Reciting and writing the alphabet was a fundamental aspect of education. For the ancient Israelites, religious education and academic education were one.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Psalm 119 starts with [Escher] 'how blessed' or 'happy are those.' Happy are those whose way is blameless.

A Hebrew word [Tamim] means complete/pure/whole. The pure and genuine person that this Psalm speaks of is someone who consistently and wholeheartedly loves the word of God. Jesus also said in Mark 12:30, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

This psalm also describes the heart of the righteous as "whole" in verse 2, undivided. If someone were to have a divided heart, that person would have his or her focus and attention split between God's law and something else. By contrast, Psalm 119 suggests that true happiness comes to those whose whole heart, or even better, whose whole mind is completely dedicated to understanding God's word.

This psalm keeps the metaphor of walking and living together by explaining that those who are blessed are those who walk in the Word of God.

When do you usually sing? When you are sad? Or happy? If we read the last

part of the psalm we read today, the writer was singing when he was a stranger dwelling in an unfamiliar land. During the times of loneliness and uncertainty, he sang God's Word for comfort. In general, the night symbolizes things that are invisible and fearful. However, to remember the word of God in the night is much harder than it is to remember the word of God during the day. During the night times in our lives, it is never easy to remember God's Word. But there is a blessing in it, today's psalm tells us.

Russell Carter (1849-1928) was a star athlete of a military academy and an excellent student academically, who went on to be a successful teacher and coach. He then spent several years as an ordained Methodist minister, after which he went to medical school. He spent the last of his professional years as a doctor of medicine. Carter was also a musician and songwriter. In 1886, he co-edited *Songs of Perfect Love* with John Sweney (1837-1899). This hymnbook included Carter's most famous hymn, *Standing on the Promises*.

Although Carter was a professed Christian most of his life, it wasn't until a crisis with his natural heart that he began to understand the reality and power of Bible promises. At age 30, his health was in critical condition and the physicians could do no more for him. Carter turned to God for help and healing.

He knelt and made a promise that healing or no, his life was finally and forever, fully consecrated to the service of the Lord. It was from that moment that the written Word of God became alive to Carter. He began to stand upon the promises of healing, determining to believe no matter what his physical condition, no matter how he felt. Over the course of the next several months his strength returned, and his heart was completely healed! Carter lived another healthy 49 years.

The hymn Carter had written several years before his healing miracle became more than words and music to him. "Standing on the Promises" became an integral part of his life.

Standing on the promises of Christ my King,
Through eternal ages let His praises ring,
Glory in the highest, I will shout and sing,
Standing on the promises of God.
Standing, standing,
Standing on the promises of God my Savior;
Standing, standing,
I'm standing on the promises of God.

Dear beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, I hope and pray that you are standing on the promises of God, singing the word of God in times of uncertainty and loneliness, and walking and living with the word of God. Fairfield Grace, may God's grace, peace, goodness, and mercy be with you, your family, your business, your studies, and with the lives of your children. Amen.