



Buried Treasure?

Unearth God's riches this Bible Sunday

BACKGROUND TO THE BIBLE READING

Psalm 119.9–16 is the Bible Sunday lectionary reading selected as the core for this year's sermon and activities. This background information will help you think through the message further as you prepare a Bible Sunday service or activity. It has also been designed to help you expand the sermon with adult audiences or prepare for an adult Bible study.

INTRODUCTION

The construction

Psalm 119 is a lengthy and carefully constructed psalm. So our verses are one gem from a whole chest! This psalm has 22 sections with each section consisting of 8 lines. Every line within any one section begins with the same Hebrew letter and the 22 sections follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet A–Z, so to speak. Also, within each section, eight Hebrew words for 'law' occur – so they all occur at least 22 times! While this might tempt some of us to engage in detailed word studies, it is probably rather pointless here. Rather these eight words function like eight musical notes, woven together in varying patterns to produce a symphony of praise.

In terms of its intricate structure, Psalm 119 is like a work of architecture. A Gothic Cathedral perhaps, with 22 pillars which all echo their thanks to God for his law. Deliberately, there is no developing thought or argument from one set of verses to another. Rather, each section – with subtle variations to maintain interest – praises God for his law and indicates suitable responses.

Essentials

There are two fundamental points for us to grasp if we are to appreciate this psalm:

Treasure 1 – God is the supreme treasure

In spite of all the references to law (eight synonyms 22 times), it is never law as such but the relationship with the lawgiver – God himself – which is the supreme subject. The law is in no way a substitute for God but is his amazing gift and an expression of God himself. There are many ways in which this



emphasis is maintained. Two key ones are the direct engagement with God – *almost* all the Psalm deals with God in the second person not the third (i.e. ‘your law’, not ‘the law’ or even ‘the law of the Lord’). The second is in the warmth of expressions found here: ‘I will praise you’, ‘I delight in following ...’, ‘the wonderful truths’, ‘I will keep it with all my heart’, ‘Show me how much you love me’, ‘they are the joy of my heart’, etc.

Treasure 2 – God’s law is valuable treasure

Law is not understood in this psalm, nor in most of the Old Testament, as burdensome legal requirements. This is the way many of us as Christians have learnt to see it, partly because of the issues Jesus raised with the Pharisees and partly because of the contrast of ‘law and grace’ in Paul’s writing and later teachings based on this. For the psalmist, God’s law is not some tiresome set of regulations designed to limit our freedoms. Instead, it is divine insight for living joyfully as people in relationship to God.

Once we grasp this rich and wide-ranging idea of ‘law’, it is no great jump to think of Jesus as the new law of God – the one who helps us understand the ways of God for people and who, by offering us a positive and dynamic relationship with him, enables us to live godly lives.

What this passage does not deal with is what happens if/when we have messed up. So for Christians, Jesus is an even greater treasure – not only law, he is sacrifice too!

The benefits

So what does this psalm have to tell us about God’s law? How can the teachings and insights in God’s Word better equip us for living, for serving one another and for pleasing God himself?

Throughout the psalm there are a number of references to how God’s law transforms us. For instance, there is historic personal testimony, e.g. ‘Even in my suffering I was comforted because your promise gave me life’ (verse 49). God’s law as promise relieved the psalmist’s time of distress and transformed how he experienced his difficulties. There are images picturing what the law does: ‘Your word is a lamp to guide me’ (verse 105). Then there is the impact on the Psalmist brought about by those who ignore the law: ‘My tears pour down like a river because people do not obey your law’ (verse 136). But is there more?

2) In our own passage, this becomes very clear. Here, particularly in verse 9, obeying the law enables a young person to keep his life pure. And in verse 11 keeping the law in his heart is the key to not sinning against God. Here it is important to understand that keeping the law in the heart does *not* mean simply memorising the verse – learning it by heart.



Nor does it mean keeping it to himself – in his heart. Rather, the Bible's idea of the heart is that it is the source of energy and direction. In other words, the Psalmist urges us to keep God's law in our heart so that it becomes the centre of our being, the driving force which shapes all our thoughts, actions and behaviour.

Valuing the treasure

So there is an interesting balance here. On the one hand, the law of God is an essential resource for transformation. On the other, we will only be transformed if we take action and commit ourselves to being shaped by that law. It is not a magic charm. So it is important to delight in this law, to value it warmly, appreciate its source in the kindness of God, and keep it at the front of our minds (repeat it frequently). For the law to change us, there needs to be a positive and dynamic relationship between the law and the person. The psalmist's language tells us we need to be *emotionally involved* ('delight'); *intellectually engaged* ('explore'/'study'/'examine'); to have a *dedicated will* ('with all my heart') and to be *practically committed* ('obeying', 'keeping', 'following').

Even this is not enough! All of it hinges on a direct relationship with God and appeal for his help ('keep me from disobeying', 'teach me your ways').

This, of course, presupposes the person's ambition is to keep their life pure. Here (in the light of verse 9), if we wished, we could refer to some of the temptations for young people indicated in Proverbs – sexual temptations, the love of money, wrong companions, alcohol, lying and so forth. Equally, we could broaden the application by highlighting the dangers implied by, say, The Ten Commandments or even Colossians 3.5–11.

If we want to live a better life, then God and his law provide three things: a) insight on the good life, b) light to discern where evil and danger lurk in the most attractive of temptations and c) the help and support to enable us to live God's way.

Making the treasure known

While the psalmist's main focus is his communication and relationship with God, as a recipient of treasure he is also keen to declare to others the insights and advantages of God's law. He is as excited about sharing his joyful discovery as the woman who found her lost coin and the shepherd who found his lost sheep. In the same way, what better news can we pass on to our world than the resources and relationship God offers in the Bible for shaping a worthwhile life?