

Psalm 119:1-8. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. In fact, with 176 verses, it's longer than 30 of the biblical books. From beginning to end, this is a psalm that delights in God and His Word.

This first section of 119 opens with a powerful plea for to walk faithfully with God. After seeing the consequences of godlessness, the psalmist determines his course will be different.

Those familiar with great suffering often produce the most enduring pieces of literature. Miguel de Cervantes was shot in battle and sold as a slave prior to writing *Don Quixote*. Fyodor Dostoevsky stood before a firing squad at one point and was exiled to four miserable years in Siberia before writing *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Pain of such magnitude is never forgotten, and it profoundly affected both authors.

Many of the psalms were written by men familiar with tragedy, and it seems the author of Psalm 119 was no exception. Tragedy became his tutor, and in its crucible this beautiful psalm was produced.

The psalmist wrote not long after the Babylonian Exile in 586 B.C. His nation had forsaken God, and after centuries of receiving compassion, the stroke of divine judgment fell (2 Chr 36:15-16). The capital city of Jerusalem and the first temple were destroyed. The Jewish people lost their independence and would not regain it for another 400 years. The worst part of being conquered was humiliation and suffering. The Babylonians exiled God's people, scattered and enslaved them.

Learning from the spiritual failures of his people, the psalmist cries out, "Oh that my ways may be steadfast... then I shall not be put to shame!" All he knew had been put to shame, and he doesn't want the same to be true of his life. This man is passionate about pleasing God, and he tells us this kind of desire leads to a life that is happy, honorable, and acceptable.

BLESSING AND HAPPINESS

Psalm 119:1-3—Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways!

To be "blessed" is to be "happy." When we say that someone is lucky or fortunate, the Hebrew equivalent would have been to say that person is blessed. This great psalm opens with a word on happiness. Every man or woman who has ever lived has longed to be happy. It's an elusive treasure. The Bible says if you really want it, follow God. Serve Him. Know His Son.

A blessed person walks blamelessly, keeps God's testimonies, seeks Him, does no wrong, and walks in His ways. These descriptions pile on top of one another to emphasize one point: A happy man is a holy man. How can a life devoted to God be fulfilling? Because He created man and knows how to fill the deepest longings of the human heart.

Blessing could have been Israel's instead of exile, but the nation reaped destruction by turning away from the Lord. Solomon married the daughters of foreign kings to make alliances. Jeroboam solidified his new kingdom by moving worship away from the temple. Others kings took the gods of other nations as their own. These actions were politically wise though spiritually damning. Short-term gains. Long-term losses. Israel fell from within, and the Lord let her fall to her enemies.

At an individual level, when believers or unbelievers do what is right and in accordance with God's commands, blessing follows (Gal 6:7). However, moral living isn't exactly what the psalmist has in mind. Good morals hold a blessing, but they have no foundation apart from God. It's rather empty and unfulfilling to be "good for goodness sake." The psalmist leads a blameless life, walking in God's ways because deep within he loves to please God. He is no Stoic or passionless worshipper. He's filled with delight doing what is right.

In the New Testament, it is jarring that believers in Christ are repeatedly called "slaves" (Rom 1:1; 2 Tim 2:24). How can a slave enjoy much of anything when submission and bondage are his way of life? The irony is that life's greatest blessings come when God is one's master.

Throughout the Psalms, God is the all-satisfying object of adoration and worship. He is praised from one page to the next by people who want to obey. Are they being forced to obey? Is their praise contrived? Not at all. They love Him, and their love finds expression by telling of Him and submitting to His commands. God has made them supremely happy (Psa 16:11, 34:8, 43:4). And here in Psalm 119, we find the same.

With a Whole Heart

AN HONORABLE LIFE

Psalm 119:4-6—You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes! Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you... and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11:29). A yoke is a wooden beam that enables two animals to pull in unison on a load. The Lord looked at the crowds and saw many who were weary with the cares of life. They wanted rest, and He told them to put on the other half of His yoke. Find rest while pulling a load? Exactly.

God commands His people to obey Him. It is a load, and yet, the psalmist found it be a great delight: “Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping Your statutes!” We don’t typically consider commands to be a joy. Yet, the one’s God has given can be just that.

“WE ARE HALF-HEARTED CREATURES, FOOLING ABOUT WITH DRINK AND SEX AND AMBITION WHEN INFINITE JOY IS OFFERED US, LIKE AN IGNORANT CHILD WHO WANTS TO GO ON MAKING MUD PIES IN A SLUM BECAUSE HE CANNOT IMAGINE WHAT IS MEANT BY THE OFFER OF A HOLIDAY AT THE SEA.”

~ C.S. LEWIS

The result? A life not put to shame. Honor is a byproduct of passionately following the Lord, faithfully applying His Word to one’s life. Serve Him with all your heart, and your latter years will not be plagued by regret (Prov 3:35).

Though the psalmist desired to obey God, he struggled. He wants his ways to be steadfast and his eyes fixed on God’s commands, but it’s not easy—the flesh is strong. This means that a blessed life characterized by joy comes by hard work. Like the joy of playing a concerto or seeing a rose garden in bloom, the path was one of struggle and work. Nothing worth having ever comes easy. Such is the same spiritually (Jas 1:2-4).

The psalmist knew his weaknesses which is why he pleaded with God that his eyes would be fixed immovably. He wanted a blessed and joyful life not characterized by regret and shame in the end.

ACCEPTABLE IN THE SIGHT OF GOD

Psalm 119:7-8—I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous rules. I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me!

The psalmist had lived in exile with God’s people or shortly thereafter. He knew something of sin’s bitterness and cried out that such suffering would not come upon him: “Do not utterly forsake me!” In other words, “Lord, do not do to me as You’ve done to the nation!” The book of Lamentations graphically details the destruction of Jerusalem. Had God’s people followed Him, such a book would never have been written.

“I will praise You.” “I will keep Your statutes.” This man is determined to follow. He knows the past, has seen God’s judgment and is dead set on treading a different path. He is resolved.

Writing centuries later, Paul considered Israel’s past and concluded, “Now these things took place as examples for us” (1 Cor 10:5-6). The Old Testament is filled with examples for believers to heed—examples of what pleases and displeases the Lord. Consider Cain and Abel (cf. Gen 4) or Moses and Pharaoh (Ex 5-14). Their lives illustrate what God condemns or commends, and each stands as a warning or an encouragement for us.

History is a kinder tutor than experience. Unfortunately, we so often learn from the latter more than the former. Strive to become acquainted with the past. Spend time reading the Old Testament. Like the psalmist, learn from the failures of others that those failures may not become yours.

LONGING FOR THE SEA

In *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry writes, “If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”

Rather than build his life on a list of dos and don’ts, the psalmist yearned after God. Out of that burning desire, he then chose to lead a life that pleased God. May we consider his example and do the same.