THE PATH OF LIFE

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Blessedness in Seasons of Lament

J. Stephen Yuille

Foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson

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For Grace Community Church, Glen Rose, Texas

It has been my joy and privilege to
minister among you (2009–2019),
and I dedicate this book to you with deep gratitude
for your love and fellowship in Christ.

Deus pro nobis

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Foreword

It is my privilege to wish you a good journey as you take your first steps on *The Path of Life* with Dr. Stephen Yuille as your companion. Were I a tour operator, I would tell you that he is one of our most experienced and reliable guides and that he will soon become your friend as well as your mentor on the way. He brings to his task a wonderful combination of experience and knowledge that will make you feel the journey has been worthwhile, combining the intellectual gifts of the academic world with the wisdom and sensitivity of years of pastoral experience.

The book of Psalms is (as Dr. Yuille notes John Calvin once wrote) "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul." But today—unless I am seriously mistaken—we are poorly skilled in spiritual anatomy on the one hand, and we are unfamiliar with the textbook on the other. Dr. Yuille is, however, a skilled physician, and here he introduces us to the most substantial chapter in the divine textbook, Psalm 119.

But why a psalm? Perhaps we feel a little like Naaman the Syrian being told to bathe in the Jordan if he would be healed when there are finer rivers at home. Why not choose Romans or Ephesians to help us in our Christian walk?

Perhaps I may be allowed to detain you from your journey for a moment with some personal reflections that will, perhaps, explain why Stephen Yuille is doing something very important for contemporary Christians.

I come from a background in which metrical versions of the Psalms, set to simple but often deeply moving tunes, have provided the

mood music of my Christian life. I have learned to walk from Psalm 23; to "sing the blues" in the words of Psalms 42, 43, and 102; to mourn in the words of Psalm 40; to confess my sins through the words of Psalm 51 (and sing it to the haunting tune St. Kilda). I have learned to appreciate the blessing of coming to the Lord's Supper singing, "I'll of salvation take the cup" and to sing at the close of countless Communion services the words of Psalm 124:7–10 to the anthemic tune St. George's Edinburgh. And I feel the emotions of biblical eschatology by singing Psalm 72:

> His name for ever shall endure;
> last like the sun it shall:
> Men shall be bless'd in Him,
> and bless'd all nations shall Him call.

For many years this seemed normal. Our own experience always does seem "normal." Little did I realize the privilege the churches that nurtured me had given to me until one day, quoting a psalm in the middle of a lecture to new seminary students, I casually asked, "How many of you in the class sing psalms in your church?" The response took me aback. More accurately it was the lack of response—a few hands were raised, but puzzled looks dominated. As I explored what lay behind the varied and unexpected responses, light dawned. The praise in many churches had become dominated by a combination of the contemporary, the use of a screen, and the widespread abandonment of the psalter and hymnal. Christians were now singing only what had been chosen by a single individual displayed one verse at a time on a screen. Thus they were being denied the basic help a praise book provides, like identifying the genre of the hymn, doctrinal category, and the rich thesaurus of praise used in the centuries of biblical worship. In addition, the substitution of a screen for a hymnbook invariably meant only one verse at a time was ever displayed. Thus, even the flow and the theological logic of the praise was being obscured. In addition, Christians were no longer able to use the real test of a hymn: What effect does it have on me, in terms of instruction of the mind and moving of the affections, when it has no musical accompaniment (by which test

it becomes fairly clear that the most moving part of some hymns and songs is the music and not the words, which means that we may be singing with our spirits but not with our minds as Paul says)?

And so I developed the habit of asking this question: What did the apostle Paul say is the first sign of being filled with the Spirit? Now even more quizzical looks from students who spotted the allusion to Ephesians 5:18. ("Surely he doesn't mean 'singing psalms!'") My response was always to say, "Well, Paul didn't mean that when you are filled with the Spirit you stop singing psalms!" Even the most radical dispensationalist would surely have to admit that the apostles expected believers who lived in the "church age" to continue to sing psalms!

But what does all this have to do with *The Path of Life*? Simply this. The Psalms have all but disappeared from the consciousness of Christians. And we may well be the first generation of Christians who have eliminated them from our subconsciousness. We will not remember them and gain strength and comfort from them in times of crisis, moments of bewilderment, or in the valley of the shadow of death. But Dr. Yuille provides us here with a course of medicine from the Psalms that can help to arrest our sickness and begin to restore our spiritual health and strength. If his prescription of Psalm 119 helps you, there are another 149 doses that will do you endless good!

The Path of Life follows in a great tradition by focusing on Psalm 119. It is the longest of the psalms. But with its twenty-two sections (one for each letter in the Hebrew alphabet), it is in many ways the psalm of psalms, ranging through all kinds of spiritual experience and emotion. More than that, it has a special concern to shape the life experience of the young—and the fact that it is an acrostic psalm suggests it was written in order to be learned by heart (in both senses of that expression). There can be little doubt that the young Jesus thus memorized it, as He almost certainly did the whole book of Psalms. They formed His mind-set and were the songs that provided the vocabulary by which He expressed his emotional life, in joy and sorrow, and especially in His fellowship with His heavenly Father. The songs that were so important to Him should, surely, be no less important for us to whom He is both Savior and example.

For these and many other reasons that you will discover as you read on, this book may be more important than you imagined when you picked it up and started leafing through its pages. Yes, it will lead you through Psalm 119. But as you are on the journey, and certainly when you come to the end of it, I hope you will find yourself saying, "This has been so invigorating, so good for me, so enjoyable. I must do more of this!" That may well make you want to read Stephen Yuille's other books, but I hope it will also make you a lover of Psalm 119 and indeed the whole book of Psalms for the rest of your life.

I have now detained you too long. It is time to get on the road! Your guide has been patiently waiting. So now enjoy walking *The Path of Life* in the company of Stephen Yuille!

—Sinclair B. Ferguson

Introduction

The title for this book, *The Path of Life*, is taken from Psalm 16:11:

> You will show me the path of life;
> In Your presence is fullness of joy;
> At Your right hand there are pleasures forevermore.

What comes to mind when you hear the word "pleasures"? Most of us probably think in terms of what appeals to our physical senses. Certain landscapes, sonatas, aromas, textures, and flavors bring us pleasure. We are so wired this way that it is difficult for us to think of pleasure in terms other than the physical. And yet the greatest pleasure known to people is actually spiritual. It is experiencing the sweetness of God in Christ and the benefits that flow from communion with Him. For believers, this alone is "the path of life." While this path is revealed throughout Scripture, it is most clearly delineated in the book of Psalms. The psalmists beckon us to fix our eyes heavenward while guiding us in the way of God-glorifying desires, God-magnifying emotions, and God-honoring thoughts. They show us what it means to delight in God as the greatest good.

While rejoicing in the One at whose "right hand there are pleasures forevermore," the psalmists don't minimize or trivialize the harsh realities of life in a fallen world.[1] On the contrary, they openly confront

1. According to Martin Luther, "Everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything

the evil that troubles from within and assails from without. As they wrestle with accompanying fears, doubts, sorrows, and anxieties, they lament before the face of God.

There are thirty-nine individual laments and twenty-three corporate laments in the Psalms. They are relatively easy to identify because they bear three key features. First, they are steeped in darkness. When we read them, we feel like we are lost in a cave without any light. They are shrouded in anger, confusion, frustration, bewilderment, desperation, anxiety, and helplessness. Second, they are concerned with a simple question: How long? The sense of urgency behind this question is heightened by two difficulties. The first is God's apparent inactivity: "Why do You stand afar off, O LORD? Why do You hide in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1). The second is God's apparent hostility: "You have brought Me to the dust of death" (Ps. 22:15). The third feature of these psalms of lament is that they are structured around three personal pronouns: I (the subject), they (the cause), and You (the remedy).

The prevalence of lament in the book of Psalms is an indicator that it ought to figure prominently in the experience of God's people.[2] Ed Welch warns, "It is a myth that faith is always smiling. The truth is that faith often feels like the very ordinary process of dragging one foot in front of the other."[3] We live in a fallen world, and often our lives

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better." *Word and Sacrament*, vol. 35 of *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 255–56. Closely related to this, John Calvin describes the Psalms as "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul, for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror." *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 1:xxxvii. The edition of Calvin's commentary on the Psalms cited here is from Baker Book House's twenty-two-volume set, *Calvin's Commentaries*, first reprinted in 1981. Volume 1 of Calvin's commentary on the Psalms is contained in volume 4 of Baker's edition. Volumes 2–3 are contained in Baker's volume 5. Volumes 4–5 are contained in Baker's volume 6. All subsequent references to Calvin's Psalms commentary refer to the page numbers in Baker's edition.

2. For an excellent treatment of the subject of lament in Scripture, see J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015).

3. Ed Welch, *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness* (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth, 2004), 31. Walter Brueggemann speaks to the "myth" that faith is always smiling: "Much Christian piety and spirituality is romantic and unreal in its positiveness. As

are touched by the ravages of the fall. Thankfully, God has provided us with these psalms to give expression to our experience. We turn to them when the pain is chronic, the illness is incurable, and the cancer is inoperable. We turn to them when the earthquake decimates a village, the flood sweeps away an entire family, and the terrorist's bomb explodes in the crowded marketplace. We turn to them when the persecution is unavoidable: there is no escape, no defense, and no higher court of appeal. We turn to them when the relationship has become poisonous: the son is belligerent, the mother is domineering, the sister is vindictive, or the father is unloving. We turn to them when the days are oppressively gray and sadness has set in like a thick fog, hiding all from view. We turn to them when the horror of sin overwhelms like a tsunami—when we see the world as it really is—from the gas chambers of Poland during World War II to the abortion mills of America in our day. In brief, we turn to these psalms whenever we cry, "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?" (Ps. 42:5). Turning to the psalms of lament, we discover that they express in words what we often struggle to articulate.[4]

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children of the Enlightenment, we have censored and selected around the voice of darkness and disorientation, seeking to go from strength to strength, from victory to victory. But such a way not only ignores the Psalms; it is a lie in terms of our experience." *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), xii. Brueggemann believes that psalms portray our experience in three stages: (1) orientation: "Human life consists in satisfied seasons of well-being that evoke gratitude for the constancy of blessing." (2) disorientation: "Human life consists in anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death. These evoke rage, resentment, self-pity, and hatred." (3) new orientation: "Human life consists in turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God, when joy breaks through the despair." *Spirituality of the Psalms*, 8. The Christian life, therefore, is characterized by two key movements: (1) from orientation to disorientation—psalms of lament (plea); and (2) from disorientation to new orientation—psalms of thanksgiving (praise). *Spirituality of the Psalms*, 29.

4. Philip S. Johnston writes, "The psalms portray situations of outward difficulty and inner turmoil with which readers easily identify.... So the struggle to maintain faith in trying circumstances is given powerful expression by the similar struggles of psalmists many centuries ago." "The Psalms and Distress," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches*, ed. David Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005), 63–64.

As we lament along with the psalmists, several things begin to happen. First, we draw near to God: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). This isn't something we merely do at conversion, nor is this something we merely do on Sundays in worship. It is our entire life's work. Far too many of us look everywhere but up when confronted with life's harsh realities. Andrew Wilson writes, "Rushing to dump our doubts and questions on friends, on family, or on Facebook, without having gone to God…is not lamenting but venting, and in the long run it doesn't do any good…. People aren't big enough to absorb your grief. God is."[5] When we draw near to Him, we discover that He is near to bless, comfort, guide, and support us. We find empathy, not apathy. We find compassion, not condemnation. We discover the reality of Isaiah's words: "Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am'" (Isa. 58:9).

Second, as we lament along with the psalmists, we talk to ourselves. We need to do this once in a while. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones counsels, "You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, and question yourself. You must say to your soul: 'Why are you cast down?' You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: 'Hope in God'—instead of muttering in this depressed unhappy way."[6] When we talk to ourselves, we remind ourselves that God has set us apart. We are His possession. He chose us, purchased us, redeemed us, regenerated us, and adopted us. Now He guards us for a salvation to be revealed in the last day. He holds us with a strong arm, even when we feel little joy and sense little assurance. He carries us with a mighty hand, even when we limp through life barely able to see beyond our immediate struggles. We remind ourselves that He is our Father and that His "mercy is great above the heavens" (Ps. 108:4).

Third, as we lament along with the psalmists, we discover that confusion gradually gives way to confidence. We grow in certainty as

5. Andrew Wilson, *The Life We Never Expected: Hopeful Reflections on the Challenges of Parenting Children with Special Needs* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2016), 55–56.

6. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Cause and Its Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 20–21.

to God's favorable acceptance of us. "If he smiles on us," says Thomas Manton, "it is enough, though the whole world should be against us."[7] We enjoy the peace that comes from having God as our friend. We enjoy the assurance that rises from "a true sense and apprehension" of God's love.[8] In short, we learn that "the path of life" is blessedness even in seasons of lament.

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7. Thomas Manton, *Several Sermons upon the 119th Psalm*, vols. 6–9 of *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton* (Birmingham, Ala.: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), 9:207.

8. Manton, *Several Sermons upon the 119th Psalm*, 9:208.

Chapter 1

A Primer on Psalm 119

As mentioned in the introduction, 62 of the 150 psalms are laments. Of these, Psalm 119 stands out as particularly noteworthy. Kevin DeYoung has observed that it usually provokes one of three reactions. The first is, "Yeah, right!" This is the attitude of the skeptic who doesn't find anything particularly compelling about God's Word in general or Psalm 119 in particular. The second reaction is, "Ho, hum!" This is the attitude of the individual who might possess a high view of Scripture but finds Psalm 119 tedious or irrelevant. The third reaction is, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" This is what believers express when the content of Psalm 119 resonates in their hearts. They think to themselves, "I love this psalm because it gives voice to the song in my soul."[1]

By the time you've finished reading this book, I trust Psalm 119 will resonate in your heart. But before we get to what it teaches concerning blessedness in seasons of lament, a brief primer is in order.

Author

There is a long-standing tradition that Psalm 119 was written by David. "It is Davidic in tone and expression," writes Charles Spurgeon, "and it tallies with David's experience in many interesting points."[2] While

1. Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word: Why the Bible Is Knowable, Necessary, and Enough, and What That Means for You and Me* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2014), 15.

2. Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Golden Alphabet: A Devotional Commentary on Psalm 119* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1969), 11.

that may be so, we really can't say with any certainty that David is its author. Any conclusion regarding authorship must be gleaned from internal evidence.

This evidence suggests that the author belongs to the monarchy. First, he describes himself in a role that implies a position of authority (vv. 46, 74, 79); he refers to himself as God's "servant" (vv. 17, 23, 38, 49, 65, 76, 84, 124–25, 135, 140, 176); and he identifies some of his enemies as "princes" (vv. 23, 161). A second feature that points to the author's royal status is his emphasis on God's law. According to the stipulations found in Deuteronomy 17:18–20, the king was required to study the book of the law so that he might keep its statutes.[3] Echoing this requirement, the psalmist expresses his desire to keep the law with his "whole heart" (vv. 2, 10, 34, 58, 69, 145).[4]

The internal evidence also suggests that the author is passing through a serious ordeal. He declares, "I am afflicted very much" (v. 107). He speaks of foes, oppressors, persecutors, adversaries, evildoers, and enemies. He mentions plots, taunts, lies, and snares. He refers to trouble, anguish, scorn, contempt, torment, and reproach. But he doesn't give any of the specifics that would allow us to establish a precise context. All we know for certain is that he is facing "life's painful realities."[5]

Piecing it all together, we can conclude that Psalm 119 paints a portrait of a suffering king—possibly David. He "is aware of his inadequacies and failings and the inadequacies and failings of the royal dynasty. Yet this leads him, not to despair, but to ground his hopes for restoration as thoroughly in Torah as possible."[6]

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3. Will Soll, *Psalm 119: Matrix, Form, and Setting*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 23 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1991), 133.

4. See Deut. 4:29; 6:5; 26:16; 30:2; 1 Kings 2:4; 8:23, 48; 2 Kings 23:2–3, 25.

5. David Powlison, *Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Punch Press, 2005), 11.

6. Soll, *Psalm 119*, 154.

Form

Psalm 119 takes the form of an alphabetic acrostic poem.[7] It consists of twenty-two stanzas, according to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Each stanza contains eight verses, beginning with the same letter. The psalmist likely settles on eight verses per stanza to reflect eight key terms for God's word:[8]

Terms in Psalm 119 for God's Word

Hebrew	English	Occurrences
tôrâ	law	vv. 1, 18, 29, 34, 44, 51, 53, 55, 61, 70, 72, 77, 85, 92, 97, 109, 113, 126, 136, 142, 150, 153, 163, 165, 174[9] Total: 25
ʿēdût	testimony (ies)	vv. 2, 14, 22, 24, 31, 36, 46, 59, 79, 88, 95, 99, 111, 119, 125, 129, 138, 144, 146, 152, 157, 167, 168 Total: 23
piqqûd	precept (s)	vv. 4, 15, 27, 40, 45, 56, 63, 69, 78, 87, 93, 94, 100, 104, 110, 128, 134, 141, 159, 168, 173 Total: 21
hōq	statute (s)	vv. 5, 8, 12, 16, 23, 26, 33, 48, 54, 64, 68, 71, 80, 83, 112, 117, 118, 124, 135, 145, 155, 171 Total: 22
mišpāt	judgment (s) ordinances (vv. 43, 91) custom (v. 132) justice (v. 149)	vv. 7, 13, 20, 30, 39, 43, 52, 62, 75, 84, 91, 102, 106, 108, 120, 121, 132, 137, 149, 156, 160, 164, 175 Total: 23

7. There are other alphabetic acrostics in the Old Testament. See Pss. 9–10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 145; Prov. 31:10–31; Lam. 1, 2, 3, 4.

8. The 178 uses of these eight terms are divided evenly between vv. 1–88 and vv. 89–176. Of the 176 verses, only four include none of these terms (vv. 3, 37, 90, 122). Of the twenty-two stanzas, only four contain all eight of the terms—one in each line (vv. 41–48, 57–64, 73–80, 81–88).

9. The first reference is to "the law of the LORD" (v. 1). The subsequent uses of *tôrâ* are in the second person possessive: *your*. Likewise, all the other words in the list are used with the second person possessive.

dābār	word (s)	vv. 9, 16, 17, 25, 28, 42 (twice—translated first as "answer"), 43, 49, 57, 65, 74, 81, 89, 101, 105, 107, 114, 130, 139, 147, 160, 161, 169 Total: 24
*'imr*â	word	vv. 11, 38, 41, 50, 58, 67, 76, 82, 103, 116, 123, 133, 140, 148, 154, 158, 162, 170, 172[10] Total: 19
miṣwâ	commandment (s)	vv. 6, 10, 19, 21, 32, 35, 47, 48, 66, 73, 86, 96, 98, 115, 127, 131, 143, 151, 166, 172, 176 Total: 21

For the most part, the psalmist uses these eight terms as synonymous expressions—that is, "each ultimately comes to represent biblical revelation in toto."[11] This indicates that everything in the psalm relates to God's word. All the terms "revolve around a center, which is summed up in a phrase found in the very first verse of the poem: 'the law of the LORD.'"[12]

Theme

The form of Psalm 119, alphabetic acrostic poem, conveys perfection and completion, thereby pointing to "the inexhaustibility of *tôrâ*."[13] This, in turn, leads to the psalm's main theme: to show "the riches of God's Word for human life."[14] First, Psalm 119 shows us what to

10. This term might be better translated as "promise." See the English Standard Version.

11. George J. Zemek, *The Word of God in the Child of God: Exegetical, Theological, and Homiletical Reflections from the 119th Psalm* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 40.

12. David N. Freedman, *Psalm 119: The Exaltation of Torah* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 33.

13. Freedman, *Psalm 119*, 89. He adds, "There is a direct correspondence between the structure and content of Psalm 119. Order is represented structurally by the psalm's acrostic format and eight key words, substantively by the psalm's encomia upon *tôrâ*. Chaos appears in the convolutions of the application of the eight key words, paralleled by the psalmist's own situation." *Psalm 119*, 93.

14. Hywel R. Jones, *Psalm 119 for Life: Living Today in the Light of the Word* (Faverdale North, U.K.: EP Books, 2009), 13.

believe about God's word.[15] It says what is true: "Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven" (v. 89). It demands what is right: "I know, O LORD, that Your judgments are right" (v. 75). It provides what is good: "Blessed are those who keep His testimonies" (v. 2).

Second, Psalm 119 shows us what to feel about God's word.[16] The psalmist delights in it (vv. 14, 24, 47, 70, 77, 143, 174), desires it (vv. 5, 10, 17, 20, 40, 131), and depends on it (vv. 31, 50, 52). "There are a lot of things we want in life," says Kevin DeYoung, "but there are few things we really need. The Word of God is one of these things."[17]

Third, Psalm 119 shows us what to do with God's word.[18] We sing the word (v. 172 ESV), speak the word (vv. 13, 46), study the word (vv. 15, 48, 97, 148), memorize the word (vv. 11, 141), obey the word (vv. 8, 44, 57, 129, 145, 146, 167, 168), and pray the word (vv. 58, 121–123, 147, 149–152, 153–160).

Matthew Henry points out that all told, the psalmist's design is to magnify "divine revelation," demonstrate its "excellence and usefulness," and recommend it to us for the governance of our lives.[19] As Jonathan Edwards explains, "God's law, that grand expression and emanation of the holiness of God's nature, and prescription of holiness to the creature, is all along represented as the great object of the love, the complacence, and rejoicing of the gracious nature, which prizes God's commandments above 'gold, yea, the finest gold,' and to which they are 'sweeter than the honey, and the honey-comb'; and that upon account of their holiness."[20]

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15. DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word*, 17–18.

16. DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word*, 18–20.

17. DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word*, 21.

18. DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word*, 22.

19. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, ed. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 705.

20. Jonathan Edwards, *On Religious Affections*, vol. 1 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (1834; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), 280.

Features

Like all the psalms, Psalm 119 is poetry. As such, it draws us into the psalmist's "personal experience."[21] Moreover, it calls for reflective reading. As Tremper Longman III explains, "Prose communicates information much more precisely and efficiently, and if that were the sole goal of the Bible, then poetic language would be a liability. But the transmission of information is not the only purpose of the Bible. Yes, the psalms do intend to teach theology, but they also arouse the readers' emotions, stimulate their imaginations, and appeal to their will. For these purposes, poetry is most effective."[22]

A significant feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. This is the use of two or three lines to describe aspects of the same reality.[23] It is done in one of three ways: (1) repetition (synonymous parallelism)—the second line says the same thing as the first line, but in different words; (2) addition (synthetic parallelism)—the second line builds on the truth expressed in the first line; and (3) contrast (antithetical parallelism)—the second line expresses the opposite of the truth expressed in the first line. These patterns appear in single verses and entire psalms.

Another feature of Hebrew poetry is the prevalence of figures of speech to describe actual events and experiences. For example, the psalmist uses metaphor and simile (introduced with the words "like" or "as"): comparing two things in order to communicate a full picture. He uses merism: citing two poles of a matter in order to include everything in between. He uses personification: treating an inanimate object as if it were a person in order to assist understanding. And he uses refrain: repeating a phrase within a section in order to emphasize a point.

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21. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *From the Mouth of God: Trusting, Reading, and Applying the Bible* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014), 97.

22. Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2014), 46.

23. This brief explanation is adapted from Ferguson, *From the Mouth of God*, 92–93.

It is important to keep these features in mind as we read Psalm 119, remembering that the psalmist's goal isn't simply to convey truth but to give expression to his experience of the truth.

Coherence

When he preached through the book of Psalms, Augustine skipped Psalm 119 because he was discouraged by its "length" and "depth." When he finally decided to preach through it years later, he still acknowledged that it "exceeded the utmost stretch of [his] powers."[24] My guess is he struggled (as many have) with the psalm's apparent lack of unity.[25] Matthew Henry writes, "There is seldom any coherence between the verses, but, like Solomon's proverbs, it is a chest of gold rings, not a chain of gold links."[26] Thomas Manton offers a similar assessment: "Many of the sentences have no other connection than pearls upon the same string, though some are as links in the same chain, fastened one to another by an apt method and order."[27] Likewise, Charles Bridges remarks, "If [the verses] are not links on the same chain in continuous and unbroken dependence, they may at least be considered as pearls upon one string, of equal, though independent, value."[28]

But is Psalm 119 really as disjointed as many people claim? It is a prayerful meditation rather than an analytic presentation, but that isn't to say it lacks coherence.[29] Generally speaking, each stanza displays a

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24. Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, ed. Cleveland Coxe, in vol. 8 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (1888; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 560.

25. Another charge levied against Psalm 119 is its repetition. In response, Spurgeon remarks, "Each verse is a distinct pearl. Each blade of grass in the field has its own drop of heavenly dew." *Golden Alphabet*, 274.

26. Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 705.

27. Manton, *Several Sermons upon the 119th Psalm*, 7:95. Again he states, "Most of the sentences of this psalm are independent, and do not easily fall under the rules of method; so that we need not take pains in clearing up the context." *Several Sermons upon the 119th Psalm*, 8:420.

28. Charles Bridges, *Psalm 119: An Exposition* (1827; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), xi.

29. A prayer request appears in vv. 8, 10, 12, 17–18, 19, 22, 25–29, 31, 33–41, 43, 49, 58, 64, 66, 68, 73, 76–80, 86, 88, 94, 107–8, 116–17, 121–22, 124–25, 132–35, 144–45, 153–54, 156, 159, 169, 170, 173, 175, 176.

thematic unity. The *Aleph* (first) and *Beth* (second) stanzas serve as a prologue. Here, the psalmist lays the foundation by describing his relationship to "the law of the LORD" (v. 1). The *Gimel* (third) stanza marks the beginning of his prayer of lament. The psalmist repeats his lament several times in stanzas 4 to 10, with different emphases in each.[30] The *Kaph* (eleventh) stanza marks the pinnacle of the prayer of lament. Here, the psalmist "hits rock bottom" as his suffering claims "center stage." As David Powlison observes, the psalmist "communicates a vivid sense of distress, sinking, vulnerability, and fragility."[31] But the *Lamed* (twelfth) stanza marks the psalm's zenith. The prayer of lament continues, but the psalmist's changed perspective shapes the remainder of the psalm. He affirms repeatedly his confidence in God. The *Taw* (twenty-second) stanza provides an appropriate conclusion, consisting of a promise of praise.

Interpretation

When it comes to interpreting Psalm 119, it is helpful to set it in the flow of redemptive history. God promised David, "I will set up your seed after you…and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:12–13). By the end of David's reign, his son Solomon had built shrines and temples for a host of false gods; as a result, Solomon's son Rehoboam forfeited half the kingdom. The Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam plunged headlong into idolatry, which continued for several centuries until God sent the Assyrians to sweep it away in 722 BC. The Southern Kingdom lasted a little longer, as there were a few good leaders among Solomon's physical descendants. For the most part, however, they too failed miserably, and consequently, in 586 BC, God sent the Babylonians to overrun it.

These historical events lead to an obvious question: What became of God's promise to establish one of David's sons on his throne forever? Here is what we must understand: when God made His promise to

30. A lament appears in vv. 19–20, 25, 28, 40, 42, 51, 53, 61, 69, 70, 78, 81–87, 95, 107, 109–10, 120, 123, 131, 136, 141, 143, 145–47, 150, 157, 161, 174, 176.

31. Powlison, *Speaking Truth in Love*, 24.

David, He had a specific man in view—Jesus Christ. In fulfillment of His promise, God established Christ on David's throne. We hear this confirmed in the angel's proclamation to Mary: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32–33). But how is any of this related to Psalm 119? Hywel Jones explains:

> The Lord has promised David that he would have a descendant who would "build a house" for the Lord's name and whose kingly throne would be "established forever." Psalm 119 is therefore the expression of a descendant of David who believed this…. It chiefly relates to David's "greater son," the Lord Jesus Christ, who kept the law of the Lord for the good of his people and who enables them, in union with him, to live in accord with it in his kingdom.[32]

So Psalm 119 shows us what Israel's king should look like. He is to keep God's law with all his heart. Ultimately, this is fulfilled in Christ, who delighted in God's word (vv. 14–16, 103, 143) and lived by it (vv. 25, 50).[33] In short, He lived "under" the Scriptures. That is how He resisted temptation, debated the scribes, instructed the multitudes, persevered through trials, and endured the cross.[34] Christ lived a life of faith (Heb. 2:10). He lived in dependence on God: "As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me" (John 6:57). He lived in communion with God: "And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me

32. Hywel Jones, *Psalm 119 for Life*, 19.

33. There are echoes of Christ's life throughout Psalm 119. He is a stranger on the earth—the object of scorn and contempt (vv. 19, 22, 61, 107). He learns obedience (vv. 34, 71) and prays for deliverance (vv. 41, 81, 145, 147). He is filled with zeal (v. 139). But is Christ the actual speaker? This seems difficult to defend in light of confessions of sin in vv. 5, 36, 37, 67, 75. Augustine's solution is as follows: "Jesus himself speaks in this prophecy: some things in his members and in the unity of his body, as if in one man diffused over the whole world, and growing up in succession throughout the roll of ages; and some things in himself our head." *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, 570.

34. For more on this, see Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2015), 63–100.

alone, for I always do those things that please Him" (John 8:29). He lived in obedience to God: "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10). And He lived in hope of God: "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father" (John 16:28).[35]

In so doing, Christ shows us the way of the godly in a fallen world.[36] Psalm 119, therefore, becomes "something we can sing not only about Christ and to Christ, but also about ourselves because of our union with Him."[37]

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35. A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 905–6.

36. We look to Christ, "the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). In what sense is Christ "the author and finisher of our faith"? (1) He is the *source* of faith. He purchases it for us, prays that we might receive it, imparts it to us, and preserves it within us. (2) He is the *example* of faith. The Greek word for "author," or "founder," is not as much "one who causes" but "one who leads."

37. Hywel Jones, *Psalm 119 for Life*, 55. It is designed for our personal and practical application. Note the psalmist's use of "I" (142 times), "me" (91 times), "my" (62 times), "myself" (3 times), and "your servant" (13 times). In the words of Jonathan Edwards: "I know of no part of the Holy Scriptures, where the nature and evidences of true and sincere godliness are so fully and largely insisted on and delineated, as in the 119th Psalm." *Religious Affections*, 280. According to Charles Bridges, "It contains the anatomy of experimental religion, the interior lineaments of the family of God. It is given for the use of believers in all ages, as an excellent touchstone of vital godliness." *Psalm 119*, ix.

Chapter 2

A Blessed God

Psalm 119:12

With the introduction to Psalm 119 out of the way, we are ready to consider how it guides us in the path of life—blessedness in seasons of lament. The place to begin is with the psalmist's conviction concerning God Himself: "Blessed are You, O LORD!" (v. 12).

A couple of decades ago, while working for a relief and development organization, I had the opportunity to visit Haiti. After all these years, one day from that trip still stands out in my memory. At the crack of dawn, I drove from Port-au-Prince into the hills; when the road stopped, I parked the truck and walked two hours up a hill to a small community. My goal was to determine if any of the springs in the area would provide viable sources of drinking water. Survey completed, I set out on the return journey. But I made a huge mistake: I neglected to fill my water bottle in preparation for the two-hour walk back to my vehicle. Thirty minutes later, I realized my folly but—rightly or wrongly—I pressed on. The sun was high overhead, and the temperature hovered around 100 degrees. By the time I reached the truck, I was close to passing out. As you can imagine, I had only one thing on my mind—water. It is amazing how trivial everything else seemed by way of comparison.

We live in a world that is unable to meet our deepest thirst. Our soul is spiritual; the material cannot satisfy it. Our soul is eternal; the temporal cannot satisfy it. Our soul is exceptional; the trivial cannot satisfy it. Yet what does the world offer? You guessed it: the material, temporal, and trivial. It offers innumerable gizmos and gadgets and other

mind-numbing distractions. It offers extreme sports, virtual reality, and reality TV. It offers amusements upon amusements. Accompanying all these offers are promises of happiness, but the world fails to deliver on its promises. It is worse than that, as David Wells explains:

> The American way of life may be the envy of the world, its gadgets and accoutrements sought after and emulated, but the American version of happiness, it turns out, is quite lethal. America is a violent and disturbed country. Its teenagers have the highest suicide rate in the world.... It leads the world in the consumption of drugs, legal and illegal, in addictions of various kinds, in divorce, in the incidence of depressive illness, and in the marketing of a vast range of therapies to counteract these problems—all of which points to a vast underlying unhappiness.[1]

In pagan religions, life is circular.[2] Adherents arrive at this conclusion based on the fact that every day is a cycle, consisting of day and night. Moreover, they look to the moon, which traces the same cycle each month, and to the sun, which traces the same cycle each year. The seasons, which are also circular, reinforce their view of life. Because life is circular, they believe that humanity is caught in a cycle of despair. That is why, for example, Greek drama plays always end in tragedy. They communicate that suffering is always waiting around the corner because it is impossible to break free from the cycle of life. Today, our society has combined ancient paganism with secularized Christian optimism. The result is evident for all to see—angst, despair, and cynicism (Eccl. 1:5, 8).

The reality is, however, that God "has put eternity in [our] hearts" (Eccl. 3:11). We know there is more to this life than the material, temporal, and trivial. We know there is something beyond the here and now. But for most people, their dreams extend no further than their own comforts. No cause grips them; no quest inspires them; and

1. David Wells, *No Place for Truth: or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 170–71.

2. I am indebted to Paul Miller for his insights in *A Loving Life in a World of Broken Relationships* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2014), 66–67.

no challenge motivates them. Their life is one prolonged yawn. Consciously or not, they have fallen prey to Macbeth's delusion:

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.[3]

Looking around, we see that happiness is the focal point of human existence. "It is the desire of all men," writes Thomas Watson.[4] No one wants to be unhappy or miserable. If we could travel to any place at any time in human history, we would discover that everyone is driven by the same fundamental desire to be happy. For this reason, parents seek to cultivate it; musicians express it; governments promise it; businesses market it; and commercials sell it. Yet happiness proves elusive because most people don't know where it is found. Watson asserts, "Millions of men mistake both the nature of blessedness and the way thither."[5] Why? Simply put, they equate it with outward things. But here is what eludes them: blessedness isn't found in changing conditions and circumstances, but in an unchanging God. As the psalmist declares, "Blessed are You, O LORD" (119:12).

Why is God blessed? Thomas Manton explains, "God is over all, and above all, blessed enough in himself, and needs nothing from us to add to his happiness and perfection."[6] This means that God doesn't require anything outside of Himself, nor does He benefit from anything outside of Himself. He is sufficient and satisfied in Himself, meaning He is His own blessedness. Does He need us? Does He gain anything

3. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5.19–28.

4. Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes: An Exposition of Matthew 5:1–12* (1660; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 24.

5. Watson, *Beatitudes*, 25. "Instead of searching for it in the right path," writes John Calvin, "they designedly prefer wandering up and down through endless by-paths, to their ruin and destruction." *Commentary on the Psalms*, 4:403.

6. Manton, *Several Sermons upon the 119th Psalm*, 6:111.

from us? "He is above our benefits and injuries," says Manton.[7] Our effect upon Him is that of a snowball hurled at the blazing sun.

Although God is sufficient and satisfied in Himself and stands in no need of us, He willingly imparts His blessedness to us, making us happy in the enjoyment of Him. This is the great promise—the sum and substance of all the promises: "I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jer. 31:33). This promise is heaven—the very heaven of heavens: "In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). George Swinnock explains,

> God is all good things, and every good thing. He is self-sufficient, alone-sufficient, and all-sufficient. Nothing is lacking in him—either for the soul's protection from all evil, or for the soul's perfection with all good. If God were your portion, you would find in him whatever your heart could desire and whatever could lead you to happiness. Are you ambitious? God is a crown of glory. Are you covetous? God is unsearchable riches. Are you lustful? God is rivers of pleasure and fullness of joy. Are you hungry? God is a feast. Are you weary? God is rest—a shadow from the heat and a shelter from the storm. Are you weak? God is everlasting strength. Are you in doubt? God is marvelous in counsel. Are you in darkness? God is the Sun of righteousness, an eternal light. Are you sick? He is the God of your health. Are you sorrowful? He is the God of all comfort. Are you dying? He is the fountain of life. Are you in distress? His name is a strong tower, to which you may run to find safety. He is a universal remedy against all sorts of misery. Whatever your calamity, he can remove it. Whatever your necessity, he can relieve it. He is silver, gold, honor, delight, food, clothing, house, land, peace, wisdom, power, beauty, father, mother, wife, husband, mercy, love, grace, glory, and infinitely more than all these.[8]

We are made for eternity, and we are made for something greater than ourselves—something greater than anything this world has to

7. Manton, *Several Sermons upon the 119th Psalm*, 6:111.

8. George Swinnock, *The Fading of the Flesh and the Flourishing of Faith*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 153–54.

offer. This something is God, of course. He created us in His image so that we might find our rest and center in Him. When we take Him as our God, we find in Him all we could ever want: an eternal and spiritual good, suitable to our every need.

At one point in *The Silver Chair*, C. S. Lewis describes Jill, parched with thirst, walking in a forest. She hears the bubbling of a stream. As she draws near, she sees a terrifying lion standing between her and the stream. Jill is arrested by holiness. She starts to back away, but the lion beckons her to come forward: "If you're thirsty, come and drink." Jill is very thirsty, but the lion is too terrifying. "I dare not come and drink," she whispers. The lion declares, "Then you will die of thirst." Jill replies, "I suppose I will go and look for another stream." To her shock, the lion declares, "There is no other stream!"[9]

God alone is blessedness, and this is what Christ has purchased for us. Peter writes, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). When we come to Him through Christ, He becomes ours. His power is ours to protect us; His wisdom is ours to direct us; His mercy is ours to pity us; His grace is ours to pardon us; His love is ours to refresh us; His joy is ours to satisfy us. On top of all this, He is "our God forever and ever" (Ps. 48:14). He isn't our God for a day, week, month, or year, but "forever and ever." He isn't our God for a thousand years, but "forever and ever." He isn't our God for a million years, but "forever and ever." Truly we can say, "Happy are the people whose God is the LORD!" (Ps. 144:15).[10]

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9. C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1981), 19–21.

10. I am indebted to George Swinnock for his insights in *The Blessed and Boundless God*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 170.