

## Lesson 12

# Psalm 119: The Word of God from A to Z

Psalm 119 is by far the longest of all the psalms with 176 verses and 315 lines. Yet, it certainly is not so difficult to understand. Its dominant theme is the importance of God's word. While elements of it may, at first, appear repetitious and perhaps haphazard in form, a closer look demonstrates a careful design. It gives its readers a kaleidoscopic or mosaic view of the many-sided qualities of Scripture. The seeming simplicity of the psalm belies the depth of its teachings.

The psalm is wholly occupied with praising God's revelations as the only true source of spiritual strength and comfort, and includes prayers for the grace to make profitable use of what God gives. In this sense, it is an extensive elaboration of the theme which opens the book—Psalm 1:1-2. The subject is viewed in the psalm in many different lights, and addressed in a variety of ways.

Various observers have pointed out that only one to three of the verses lack some reference to God's word. The 19<sup>th</sup> century commentator Franz Delitzsch has written, "Here we have set forth in inexhaustible fullness what the word of God is to a man and how a man is to behave himself in relation to it."

It is important to draw from the psalm that God's word is not seen

as valuable merely from the view of having a theoretical or scholarly knowledge of it. The psalmist emphasizes throughout how the law or teaching of God must be sought, learned, and obeyed so that a man can find happiness, peace, and well-being. Thus, the psalm provides an extended meditation on "walking" according to the Law of the Lord. The tone for this is set in verse one and can be seen also in verses 47, 77, 97, and 174 which speak of the writer's "delight" in that word. To the psalmist, God's instructions are not viewed as harsh edicts, but as a source of joy.

The law became to the psalmist a representative of God Himself. He ascribes to the law many of the attributes of God. This is but one important lesson, one further emphasized in the New Testament when Jesus is described as "the Word" (John 1:1).

Trying to capture the essence of the psalm, men have variously entitled it "Meditating on the Lord's Instruction from A to Z," or "Delight in God's Decrees," or "The Alphabet of Divine Love" or "The Golden Alphabet."

The psalm uses at least eight different Hebrew words as virtual synonyms for God's instructive and declarative

communications to man.

It also has been suggested that the psalm appears to have been written for people who view their life in this world as a sojourn, a journey through territory not their homeland. Thus, as aliens or foreigners, they need God's word to direct their way.

Remembering that psalms are designed to express feelings as well as facts, it is worth noting that Psalm 119 is probably the greatest expression of love for God's law to be found in the Old Testament. It is through this law that man establishes fellowship with God.

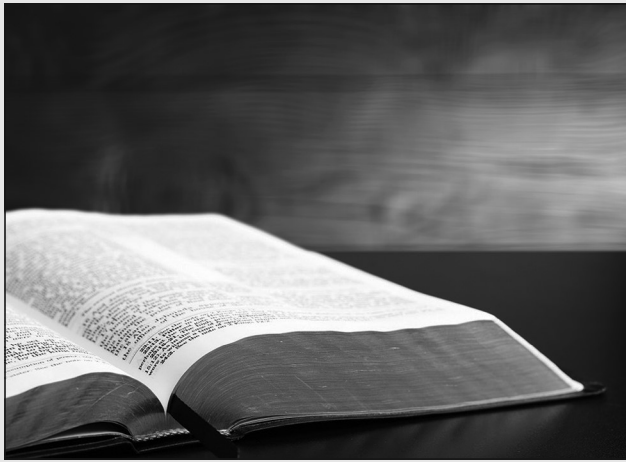
God is mentioned in some fashion in every verse. It contains, by one calculation, seventy prayer requests. The psalmist refers to himself 325 times and mentions his suffering in sixty-six verses.

### Authorship and Date of Writing Unknown

There is no information in the psalm that definitively identifies who was its human author. It has no title, superscription, or directions for its use. Suggestions of possible writers have included David, Hezekiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, and Daniel. Some have

### Scripture Synonyms

- Law—25x
- Word—24x
- Rulings or ordinances—23x
- Testimonies—23x
- Commandments—22x
- Decrees or statutes—21x
- Precepts or charges—21x
- Sayings, promises—19x



suggested that it was written after the Babylonian captivity, assuming it reflects an increased devotion to the revealed word of God springing from the exile experience, but there is nothing in the text necessitating such a conclusion.

A comment by Charles Spurgeon is thought-provoking. He said, “There is an evident growth in subject matter (*in the 119<sup>th</sup> psalm*—rb). The earlier verses are of such a character as to lend themselves to the hypothesis that the author was a young man, while many of the later passages could only have suggested themselves to age and wisdom. In every portion, however, it is the fruit of deep experience, careful observation, and earnest meditation.”

### Written in a Complete Acrostic Style

For English readers, the fact that this psalm was written in an *alphabetic* or *acrostic* form is largely irrelevant to our use of the psalm. In Hebrew poetry the acrostic doesn’t spell out words. Rather, the initial lines or stanzas begin with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with succeeding lines or stanzas beginning with succeeding letters of the alphabet.

In English, a simple example might be as follows, using only the first three letters:

*Almighty is our  
God  
Atheists shall quake  
before Him  
All men shall bow  
before Him  
Beautiful is the  
name of our Lord*

*Beneficial to man is His word  
Become, therefore, a follower of  
God*

*Come to speak tributes to the Lord  
Cry aloud your praises  
Carry forth His word to the ends of  
the earth*

One writer has described this form as “curiously arranged as a sort of index” and another has suggested the psalm takes more the form of a crossword puzzle than a poem. And, this special Hebrew acrostic form may seem artificial to us, but consider that an ancient Jew reading our use of rhyme might reach the same conclusion about our poetic devices.

### What Is the Purpose of the Acrostic Form?

We don’t know for certain why this form was used. It has been speculated that it served to:

- Aid memorization
- Serve as a structural hint that the message is comprehensive, covering the topic from “A to Z”.

It is important to realize that the acrostic form is not unique to psalm 119. Most serious Bible students are

familiar with Proverbs 31:10-31, which focuses on the greatness of a “virtuous woman.” Those 22 verses each begin with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, beginning with *aleph* and ending with *taw*. (Observe that Hebrew has twenty-two letters, compared to the twenty-six in English.) Lamentations also makes use of this form.

Eight other psalms use the acrostic format, but are more irregular (9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and 145). Psalm 119 is a bit different and more elaborate than the others, in that it uses the alphabetic format, using eight lines beginning with each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Some Bibles, including the New International Version, have subheadings between the sections, using the English spelling of each Hebrew letter (*aleph, beth, gimel, daleth, etc.*).

### Overview of the Psalm

The following notes are a sort of cryptic “Cliff Notes” style overview of each stanza of Psalm 119. Observe that each octuple can stand alone as a deep and expansive thought requiring considerable meditation, or can be linked to others that evolve the thoughts in new directions.

Notice again that Psalm 119 appears to be a massive development of the briefer message of Psalm 1, which begins and sets the tone for the entire book.

**א – Aleph** (vv. 1-8). Here is expressed the blessedness of the one who walks in, keeps, and seeks the law, ways, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments,

and judgments of the Lord.

**ב – Beth** (vv. 9-16). Answered here is the question that confronts the

young. How can one with limited learning and little experience properly direct his/her life? It is accomplished by heeding, meditating upon, and embracing in heart the word of the Lord.

**ג – Gimel** (vv. 17-24). Possible insight into the psalmist is given here. He is a stranger or sojourner who is the object of sinful scheming and scorn by others. He speaks of lament over his condition but also of faithfulness to and delight in the testimonies and statues of God.

**ד – Daleth** (vv. 25-32). God’s “way” is dominant here. The psalmist pleads that God keep him from the wrong way and show him the right way. He asserts his trust in God’s way.

**ה – He** (vv. 33-40). Here the thought moves from God’s way to the psalmist’s need to “walk” in that way. He pleads with God to teach him, to give him understanding, to incline his heart, turn his eyes from wrong, revive him, and establish him through revelation.

**ו – Waw** (vv. 41-48). The psalmist expresses his personal commitment to the words and ordinances of the Lord, and solicits the Lord’s mercies and salvation as a result.

**ז – Zayin** (vv. 49-56). He finds comfort, hope, and joy in God’s word, even as he is assailed by the wicked, who forsake the Law of the Lord.

**ח – Heth** (vv. 57-64). He now illustrates how he has been protected

by his obedience to God’s law, commandments, precepts, and judgments.

**ט – Teth** (vv. 65-72). The word “good” is prominent here. He asks God to teach him good judgment and knowledge. God is good and His law “better” than money. Even the affliction the psalmist suffered when he went astray is declared good, because it disciplined him.



**י – Yodh** (vv. 73-80). The focus is upon learning God’s will, leading to a “delight” in His commandments. He expresses confidence that the One who made him will guide him rightly.

**כ – Kaph** (vv. 81-88). Life can be difficult and full of suffering, yet the psalmist declares he will not use that as an excuse to reject God’s word. Quite the opposite, he will trust in God’s word for salvation.

**ל – Lamedh** (vv. 89-96). I am Yours, save me! Again, the emphasis is on the overwhelming troubles facing the psalmist and his unwavering trust in God to save him. God created all things and His faithfulness will endure through all generations.

**מ – Mem** (vv. 97-104). The psalmist expresses his “love” of God’s law, declares he “meditates” upon it all the day, and that it makes him wiser than his enemies and the aged. He says God’s words are “sweeter than honey.”

**נ – Nun** (vv. 105-112). Psalm 119 pictures life as a journey. Here, that journey is depicted as being in the dark, and God’s word is pictured as a lamp, giving his path light.

**ס – Samekh** (vv. 113-120). God’s word is powerful when viewed singularly as the only source of truth. The psalmist contrasts his singular love of God’s law to the “double-minded” who only partially embrace God’s law. Jesus also said, “You cannot serve two masters.”

**ע – Ayin** (vv. 121-128). Declaring himself to be God’s “servant,” the psalmist pleads that God act quickly to save him from his enemies, who have regarded God’s law as void.

**פ – Pe** (vv. 129-136). Siding with God, the psalmist speaks of God’s teachings as being wonderful, enlightening, giving understanding to the naïve. He longs for, pants for those teachings to direct his steps and keep iniquity from having dominion over him.

**צ – Tsadhe** (vv. 137-144). The righteousness and purity of God’s ways are contrasted with the smallness and weakness of the psalmist. Yet, this is all the more a reason to embrace God’s truth.

ק – **Qoph** (vv. 145-152). He repeatedly asserts his commitment to keeping the law of the Lord, even as he cries out for God to hear, save, help, and revive. The point: Only those who keep the word of the Lord have reason to expect God to “hear” them.

ר – **Resh** (vv. 153-160). He continues his cry for rescue from his enemies. He

seeks God as a redeemer, to plead his cause. He bases his plea for help on his trust in and love of God’s word, which is wholly true and endures forever.

ש – **Sin/Shin** (vv. 161-168). Just as Jesus offered His disciples peace, even as He foretold of great persecution, so the psalmist here focuses on the peace he enjoys even in the midst of trials.

ת – **Taw** (vv. 169-176). Once again expressing ultimate confidence in God’s word, a commitment to continually praise and teach it, the psalmist also humbly depicts himself like a sheep gone astray, who needs God’s word to draw him back to the right path.

### Homework and Questions

*Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.*

1. Using the acrostic or alphabetic format, create a shortened ABC poem that teaches something about God’s word. We’ll title the poem “The ABCs of God’s Word.”

A \_\_\_\_\_  
A \_\_\_\_\_  
B \_\_\_\_\_  
B \_\_\_\_\_  
C \_\_\_\_\_  
C \_\_\_\_\_

2. List five ways in which God’s word is valuable to you. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Describe how life is like a journey on a pathway. Also demonstrate how God’s word is critical in making that journey successfully. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. How is God’s word like a lamp? What description of Jesus is made in the New Testament that links Him to this concept? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. What role does God’s word have in establishing and maintaining fellowship with Him? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. What purpose or sense is there in loving, delighting in, and keeping God’s law if, by so doing, our lives are made difficult by those who reject, ignore, or disobey that law? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_