

Psalm 119 v 1 to 48

Prayer: “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law...” (Psalm 119 v 18)

Introduction: This is the longest psalm, and arguably the greatest. Charles Spurgeon, in his classic commentary *The Treasury of David*, wrote some 400 pages of commentary on this one psalm! It is 176 verses long, comprising 22 stanzas of eight verses each – it is a special ‘acrostic’ psalm, in that each stanza is assigned a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with every verse in the stanza beginning with that letter. Thus each of the eight verses in the first stanza begins with the letter *aleph* א, all verses in the second stanza begin with *beth* ב, and so on to the last stanza, where each verse begins with *tau* ט, the last Hebrew letter.

Author: Many prominent scholars (Spurgeon, Lockyer) assume this psalm was written by David, some suggest Jeremiah, but the truth is we do not know who wrote it. There is no mention of the temple, sacrifices or the priestly ministry, which suggests it may belong to the Babylonian exile or post-exile period. The psalmist clearly occupied a high social position (see v 23, and v 46 where he speaks about God “before kings”).

Theme: An expansion of Psalm 1 v 2: “But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night” and Psalm 19 v 7 to 11 – the psalmist has a profound love for God’s word and his law. The main theme is: The practical application of the Word of God in the day-to-day life of the believer. There are two key prayers: “Give me understanding” (e.g. v 34), and “Give me life” (e.g. v 40).

Vocabulary: Almost every verse contains at least one of the following handful of words, which are not synonymous, but conceptually related (the numbers in brackets are total occurrences in the Old Testament):

1. Way = דֶּרֶךְ, *derek* (705), or אֶרֶץ, *orach* (58) – road, direction, habit, manner or course of life (used in New Testament – see John 14 v 6, Acts 9 v 2)
2. Law = תּוֹרָה, *torah* (219) – instruction, teaching, revelation (more general than just the Law of Moses)
3. Testimonies = עֲדוֹת, *edot* (26) – witness, faithfulness, dependability – see Deuteronomy 31 v 26
4. Precepts = פְּקֻדִים, *piqqudim* (24) – detailed instructions, after root word פָּקַד, *paqad*, which means to pay attention to, look after, care about, look closely and take action (like a military officer or overseer)
5. Statutes = חֻקִּים, *chuyim* (127) – engraved (in stone), inscribed, permanent – see Isaiah 30 v 8
6. Commandments = מִצְוֹת, *mitzvot* (181) – the authority of God’s word (unconditional, not optional)
7. Judgments = מִשְׁפָּטִים, *mishpatim* (421) – the decisions of a wise and righteous Judge (Exodus 21 v 1), God’s righteous justice – see Psalm 119 v 137
8. Word = דָּבָר, *davar* (1,439) – general term, God’s truth stated, promised or commanded
9. Promise = אִמְרָה, *imrah* (49) – after root word אָמַר, *emer* (to say), utterance, saying, word, speech

Notes and questions for discussion:

- *Aleph* א, (v 1 to 8) – Notice that verses 1 to 3 talk about “those”, but from v 4 (to the end of the psalm) the tone is more personal (“you”, “my” and so on). How does the psalmist describe those who are “blessed”? What does he say about God? What does he long for? What does he promise he will do?
- *Beth* ב, (v 9 to 16) – What does the psalmist teach us about avoiding temptation and sin? In every verse the psalmist says that he does, or will do, certain things – what are they?
- *Gimel* ג, (v 17 to 24) – What does it mean to be a “sojourner on the earth” (v 19)? Where is our true citizenship? What ‘negative’ ideas are introduced in this stanza (see v 21 to 23)? How does the psalmist deal with them? What ‘positive’ things does he affirm about God’s law and testimonies?
- *Daleth* ד, (v 25 to 32) – Spurgeon summarizes the ‘daleth’ (= d) stanza as “despair, devotion and determination” – is this an adequate summary? What does the psalmist determine he will do in v 32?
- *He* ה, (v 33 to 40) – This Hebrew letter is the ‘h’ and represents an out-breathing. Every verse is a heartfelt prayer! For what does the psalmist pray? See especially verses 34 and 40. “I will keep it to the end” (v 33) is about finishing well – consider Paul’s example in 2 Timothy 4 v 7.
- *Vau* ו, (v 41 to 48) – This letter is also the word ‘and’, so every verse in this stanza begins with ‘and’. What is the psalmist’s attitude towards God’s word, judgments and commandments (v 42, 43, 47)? What does he promise he will do? How will he communicate God’s word to others?