

Confessions of a Torah Lover

Text:

Psalm 119:97, 113, 127, 159, 163, 165, 167

“Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.”

“I hate the double-minded, but I love your law.”

“Therefore I love your commandments above gold, above fine gold.”

“Consider how I love your precepts! Give me life according to your steadfast love.”

“I hate and abhor falsehood, but I love your law.”

“Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble.”

“My soul keeps your testimonies; I love them exceedingly.”

Introduction:

Attributed value is always related to perception. We value things only to the degree that we perceive them to be valuable. All of us have a scale of values. We may not have logically thought it through, but we do live by it. We value some things more than others, and the value we attach to things is reflected in the priority we accord to them. We instinctively give our greatest attention to the things we value the most highly. We may lie to ourselves and try to convince ourselves that we have a different scale of values, but reality is reality, and what we invest ourselves in most is what we love most. Wisdom is to love the right things and to love them in the proper order. The wise person has learned to properly order his loves.

When we come to Psalm 119 there is no doubt about what tops the list of the psalmist’s loves. If there is one of its 176 verses that sums up all that he has to say, it is verse 97: “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.” Whatever our own attitude might be toward God and his self-revelation, we cannot read this Psalm without saying to ourselves: “whoever wrote this truly loved God and his Torah.”

What most everyone knows about Psalm 119 is that it is the longest chapter in the Bible. What you may not know is that its length is predetermined by what it projects to do. It is an alphabetic or acrostic Psalm of a much more ambitious nature than any of the others. What

the author does is to begin with the twenty two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and eight synonyms for God's Torah or law. These may vary according to the translation you are reading, but in the KJV they are: "law", "commandments", "judgments", "precepts", "testimonies", "statutes", "word", "word" (sayings). The eight are used between 25 and 19 times each. There is no set pattern to their use. The twenty two letters establishes the numbers of strophes in the Psalm, and the eight synonyms establish the number of verses in each strophe. Each strophe corresponds to a letter of the alphabet and each verse of that strophe begins with that letter. Twenty two times eight equals 176, thus was its length established at its beginning. Not every strophe contains all of the eight synonyms, but all but four verses (3, 37, 90, 122) contain at least one of them, and five verses (16, 48, 160, 168, 172) contain two. There are four strophes where all eight are employed (*heth, yod, kaph, pe*).

At first reading this Psalm may seem repetitive and monotonous. It may appear as a childish exercise of trying to say the same thing 176 different ways, and you may think to yourself two or three strophes into it: "I understand. Can we go on to something else?" This would be a mistake. There is a storyline in the Psalm that can be concealed by its structure, but it is none the less there. Scholars struggle when they try to categorize this Psalm into one of the established psalm categories. Most classify it as a wisdom psalm because of its beginning with a double beatitude, and its obvious relationship to Psalm 1 and Psalm 19, but most go on to say that it is much more and contains elements of other types of psalm. It is certainly not my goal here to bore you with a detailed examination of something that probably doesn't interest you anyway, but I think we can make an observation that will help us read and pray Psalm 119 with greater appreciation. Can we not call it a confession? In fact the title I have given this sermon is "Confessions of a Torah Lover." Two things at least mark it out as a confession. First, it is addressed to God, and secondly it is autobiographical. A comparison that comes to mind is Augustine's *Confessions*. What sets it apart from a writing like Augustine's *Confessions* is its acrostic structure. It is not chronological, but it is biographical, and if we pay close attention we can find enough biographical references in it to reconstruct the spiritual pilgrimage of its author and that is what I want us to do. In this respect we will find points of correspondence with our own spiritual experience and with those from the past, who like this psalmist have left us confessions, i.e. accounts of the work of God in their lives.

Before doing this, allow me to insert an observation about the main subject of this confession, the Torah or God's law. The one term which best sums up the eight synonyms is God's covenant revelation, or God's self-revelation. The thing that overwhelms this writer, and that should overwhelm us is that God has spoken. This is a life-transforming realization. Once we realize that there is a Word of God we can never be the same. I would add to this the fact that God's revelation is even greater for us than it was for this ancient psalmist. For us God has completed his revelation in the incarnation. He spoke in times by unto the fathers, including

our writer by the prophets, but he has spoken unto us by the Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). In fact, when the risen Christ refers to himself three times in the book of Revelation as the “Alpha and the Omega” (1:8; 21:6; 22:13), he is saying clearly what the psalmist is trying to say here: ultimate, final truth is to be found in God’s revelation. Thus when the Christian reads and prays this Psalm he does no violence to the text when he understands by “Torah” and its synonyms all that God has revealed of himself, including his revelation *par excellence* in Jesus Christ.

Having said this, let us examine the life of this unknown lover of God’s revelation and try to glean from it insight that would help us to become, like him, a part of that noble company that has loved God’s word more than life. I want us to observe four major movements of the grace of God in the life of the Psalmist that are always present when a true work of grace is being accomplished. They are:

- Created for God’s Word
- It was good that I was afflicted
- Taught of God
- Wisdom

I. Created for God’s Word

Let’s begin with verse 73 where he says: “Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your commandments.” This is not the beginning of the Psalm, but it is, most likely, the beginning of the writer’s spiritual experience. It immediately makes one think of the Augustine’s opening to his confessions: “We were made for thee, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” In a fallen world it is possible to live our lives ignorant of the purpose for which we were created. All of us do so, at least temporarily, until we are quickened and enlightened by the Spirit of God. Paul describes the Gentiles’ life before Christ as a time of ignorance. Seen from the other side, we wonder how we could have been so blind, but that is exactly what we were, blind, or perhaps better in the present case, deaf; deaf to the life-giving Word of God. Then like this psalmist, or like the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus, or like Augustine in his garden hearing a child say: “take up and read”, our ears are opened and we hear God speaking, and we realize that he created us for this very thing. The Swiss theologian Emile Brunner has stated that “all other things were created by the Word of God, but man was created for the Word of God.” When we understand that, we begin to pray whole-heartedly with the Psalmist: “Give me understanding that I may learn your commandments.”

II. “It is Good that I was Afflicted”

A second step to be observed in the writer’s spiritual pilgrimage is affliction. It is a recurring theme throughout the Psalm. In the ninth strophe, *teth*, the writer indicates that it was through affliction that he came to hear and obey the revealed word. Listen to what he says:

You have dealt well with your servant,
O Lord, according to your word.
Teach me good judgment and knowledge,
for I believe in your commandments.
Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I keep your word.
You are good and do good;
_teach me your statutes.
The insolent smear me with lies,
but with my whole heart I keep your precepts;
their heart is unfeeling like fat,
but I delight in your law.
It is good for me that I was afflicted,
that I might learn your statutes.
The law of your mouth is better to me
than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

In verse 67 he talks about a time before he was afflicted in which he was going astray. He contrasts this with the present in which he keeps God’s Word. It was the affliction that opened his eyes and ears to God’s Word. Therefore he says in verse 71: “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.” We might consider this strophe as his conversion account. God uses affliction to get our attention so that he might open our understanding to the beauty of his revelation. The evidence of this spiritual enlightenment is that we, like the Psalmist, come to value God’s Word above all other things. This is the reason the strophe closes with the words: “The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.” This was not always true. He came to this position through God’s affliction that was followed by God’s comfort.

In Psalm 119, as in life, the solution to our affliction is God’s comfort. Suffering and affliction are a part of life. We must never imagine that the blessed life is a life free of affliction. Remember Jesus said: “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.” We live in a fallen and imperfect world where suffering is the inevitable consequence of existence. What those who have attained some degree of wisdom look for is not freedom *from* affliction, but

comfort *in* affliction. This is what our psalmist has found. He speaks of God’s comfort on several occasions, but it is especially the theme of the seventh strophe, *zayin* (vv. 49 – 56):

Remember your word to your servant,
in which you have made me hope.
This is my comfort in my affliction,
that your promise gives me life.
The insolent utterly deride me,
but I do not turn away from your law.
When I think of your rules from of old,
I take comfort, O Lord.
Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked,
who forsake your law.
Your statutes have been my songs
in the house of my sojourning.
I remember your name in the night, O Lord,
and keep your law.
This blessing has fallen to me,
that I have kept your precepts.

Notice what he says in verse 50: “This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life”. His comfort comes from God; it comes from the promise communicated to him through God’s revelation. God has spoken; he has a Word that comes from outside of human wisdom that reassures him in his affliction. There are words only God can pronounce, because there is a truth and a knowledge that human wisdom cannot attain. Without that word from God our afflictions becomes unbearable. To exist is to suffer, and that suffering does not end when our relationship with God begins.

We stated above that it was affliction that brought the writer of this Psalm to the knowledge of God; that opened his ears to hear the word of God. A careful reading of the Psalm demonstrates clearly that his affliction did not end with his conversion to God. It was an ongoing part of his existence. What changed was the nature of the affliction (It was no longer due to his own folly), and his expectations in his affliction (he now had hope in the comfort of God).

Those who know God, and who are on the path to wisdom, have come to understand that what they can expect from God is not a life free from affliction, but God’s comfort in affliction. The Apostle Paul called this the “peace of God that passes all understanding.” So the Psalmist says: “This is my comfort in affliction, that your promise gives me life.” His afflictions continue. Some of them are persecutions from without, and some are torments from within, but he is now

comforted in his affliction because God has spoken. He has heard words that only God can speak and those words sustain him. God's statutes have become his song in "the house of his sojourning". This means that he can accept his mortality and his finitude joyfully, because the final word does not come from human wisdom, but from outside of human existence. God has spoken, and his final word is good news. I can endure the night of human existence with a song, because I have a hope that is not grounded in my own wisdom, but in divine revelation.

III. Teach Me, O Lord

We have seen that the great preoccupation of the Psalmist in this Psalm is God's Torah. He refers to it with one of the eight synonyms that he employs for it in all but four of the 176 verses. We have further seen that these words all refer to God's revelation; to that truth that God has spoken that can only come from him. The writer knows that he was created to hear these words; that they alone can give him life. These words alone make sense out of the afflictions of life. Therefore he says that he loves them above all other things for he has understood that without them all other things would be meaningless. What I want us to notice now is what he asks God for relative to his Word. Remember that almost all of what he says is addressed to God. These words are a prayer, and that prayer is primarily preoccupied with faithfulness to God and to his Word. In light of this fact the verbs that he employs reveal his deep desires.

When we analyze these verbs, which indicate what he is asking God for, we first notice that there are two general categories of requests. First, he is praying that he might faithfully obey all that God has commanded. The key verb in this group of requests is "to keep". For his part, the desire of the Psalmist's heart is to keep God's commandments, so over and over he uses the verb "to keep" and its synonyms to express this desire. Here are a few examples:

Psa 119:2, Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart.

Psa 119:8, I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me!

Psa 119:17, Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word.

Psa 119:44, I will keep your law continually, forever and ever,

Psa 119:60, I hasten and do not delay to keep your commandments.

Psa 119:63, I am a companion of all who fear you, of those who keep your precepts.

Psa 119:106, I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to keep your righteous rules.

Psa 119:134, Redeem me from man's oppression, that I may keep your precepts.

Psa 119:136, My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.

Psa 119:145, With my whole heart I cry; answer me, O LORD! I will keep your statutes.

So over and over again throughout the Psalm the Psalmist prays that he might keep God's Torah, his statutes. However, he knows that left alone he is incapable of doing this. He desires it, but to do it he must have God's enabling. This brings us to the second group of predominant verbs. With these verbs he asks God for his enabling. The two primary ones are "to quicken" and "to teach". He uses each of them at least a dozen times.

To quicken is to give life or to make alive. Our writer has become aware of something that all who love God's Word know. It is God's life-giving work in us that enables us to receive the Word of God as the Word of God. Verse 18 expresses it this way: "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law." The Apostle Paul talks about this in II Corinthians 3 where he says that until the Holy Spirit removes the veil on our hearts, we remain dead to the message of the Scriptures. But when he does, he says: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty" (verse 17). God opens our minds to receive his truth. He liberates us from the blindness to receive his truth. If the desire of our heart is to keep God's Word, to live by it, to be transformed by it, we should begin by praying:

Psa 119:40, Behold, I have longed after thy precepts: quicken me in thy righteousness.
Or,

Psa 119:107, I am afflicted very much: quicken me, O LORD, according unto thy word.

After asking God to quicken him, to make him alive to his Word, the Psalmist then asks God to teach him. He realizes that if he is to know the truth and do it, he must be taught of God. We return again to the opening words of the ninth strophe that we quoted earlier:

Thou hast dealt well with thy servant, O LORD, according unto thy word.

Teach me good judgment and knowledge: for I have believed thy commandments.

Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.

Thou *art* good, and doest good; teach me thy statutes (verses 65-68).

We will never make much progress in the pursuit of God's wisdom without a sincere desire to be taught of God. There are words that only God can say, and there are lessons of life that only

God can teach. He will use our circumstances and, as we saw earlier our afflictions to teach us his wisdom. This brings us to the last step in the spiritual pilgrimage of this Psalmist, wisdom.

IV. Thou has Made me Wiser than my Enemies

The strophe of this Psalm that best expresses the final outcome of the desire that it expresses to be taught of God, to walk in his ways, to not be misled by the wicked is the eleventh, *mem* (verses 97-104) which say:

Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.

Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me.

I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.

I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.

I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word.

I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me.

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.

Of all the strophes of this Psalm, this is the most positive, the most resolved. The Psalmist's prayers have been answered. God has opened his ears and eyes to receive his truth; he has been taught of God, and he has been enabled to keep God's Word. He has reached a level of resolution and contentment in life that few ever reach. The word that dominates these verses is "understanding". Life makes sense to him. He can say: "Your commandments makes me wiser than my enemies." "I have more understanding than my teachers". "I understand more than the aged." He can say all of these things, not because he is better educated, or more intelligent than everyone else, but because he has been taught of God. Those who attain this kind of wisdom are free from pride and vain glory. They know that in the end it is a pure gift of God. It is for this that God created us. God brings us through affliction that we might learn it, and when we do all we can say is: "O how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day."

