

Walking In the Law of the LORD

Psalm 119:1-8

I can hardly believe that we have come to the end of 2024.

I can hardly believe that we are one quarter of the way through the twenty first century. It seems like just yesterday everyone was on the edge of their seats about the Y2K problem.

Remember that?

Computers back in those days kept track of the year by only using the last two digits of the year.

So when the date rolled from 1999 to 2000 all of those computers would have a date of 1900.

Some people predicted total catastrophe.

There were fears of losing the power grid, of planes falling out of the sky, banking collapse, and alike.

Some countries spent tonnes of cash to prepare and others spent very little.

Whether all the money was worth it is still a matter of debate but we do know that when we entered into a new millennium twenty five years ago there was no big disaster and everything kept on going as it had the day before.

As I was thinking about the calendar turning to another New Year, I got to thinking about how that often happens in life.

How anticipating a big event or going through something major gets us to reflect on our lives.

How often does something happen in life where we think to ourselves, “Things are going to be different now!”

How often though, do those things turn out a lot like Y2K?

Where we think this big thing is going to happen, but it turns out not much happens at all?

The longer I live the more I am convinced that life is not primarily determined by the big things or the perceived big things that happen to us.

Of course those things matter, but I want to suggest to you this morning that our lives are impacted far more by the things of everyday life than by the things we consider to be big events.

I believe that one of the most important everyday decisions we can make is to be in God’s word on a regular basis.

I have made it my habit in the season of the New Year to turn our attention towards the word of God to consider the importance of the Scriptures to everyday life.

That is what we are going to do this morning and next Sunday as well.

[To do that we are going to look at Psalm 119. This is the longest chapter in the Bible, it is almost in the exact middle of the Bible, and it is all about the word of God. The psalm is a massive acrostic and a work of alliteration. Eight verses are dedicated to each of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet and the first word in each verse in those groups of eight begins with the same letter. It is an amazing work of wisdom and poetry dedicated to the importance and glory of the Scriptures. This week we are looking at the first eight verses and next week we will look at verses 9-16. In these first eight verses there are at least five lessons about the word of God that should motivate us to have the scriptures be a part of our everyday life. In the opening verses we see the positive impact obeying the Bible's instructions has on a person's life, we see that...]

Point #1 – God's laws benefit people. (Verses 1-3)

The LORD commands all that He does for the good of humanity and when we obey Him we experience that reality.

The psalmist begins by writing about other people and he does it with great confidence.

Look with me at what he says **verses 1**.

Let's consider the word 'blessed' for a moment.

Likely the best way to understand that word in this psalm is to think of contentment/joy/happiness.

This is talking about a feeling of satisfaction.

A feeling that life is good and you wouldn't want it to be any other way.

Who doesn't want that? Who actually has it?

'Those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD'

When he talks about a person's 'way' and 'walk' he is talking about the way they live their everyday life.

The way they conduct themselves from day to day is in keeping with what God says.

To that he adds this in **verses 2-3**.

People who 'keep his testimonies' are 'blessed'.

The word keep there is an ongoing action and notice the connection he makes between the keeping of God's word and the heart.

These 'blessed' people see that keeping God's law is about something far more than keeping rules it is about knowing the LORD.

That is important for two reasons.

One, knowing God is the only way to be truly happy, and two, loving God is the only thing that can keep a person motivated to obey God.

[Think of Joash King of Judah. He became king when he was just seven years old on account of the courage of a priest named Jehoiada. As long as Jehoiada was alive and guiding him, Joash did what was right. When Jehoiada died Joash quickly drifted into disobedience and idolatry. He obeyed for the sake of someone else rather than seeking the LORD with his own heart and so he abandons walking in God's ways and everything turned into a train wreck.]

The interesting thing about Joash is that while he listened to Jehoiada and was doing many things that were 'right in the eyes of the LORD' both he and his people benefitted.

Why? Because God's ways are good for people.

Just think about the effect of people obeying commandments 5-10.

What if people honoured their parents? What if there was no murder, adultery, stealing, lying, or wanting other people's stuff?

I think we can all agree things would be way better which shows us that God's laws are good for people.

[Here is the thing. People will not keep commandments 5-10 in any kind of meaningful way if they could care less about commands 1-4. Worshipping other things, making false gods, treating God's glory with contempt, and making no time for worship is likely to harden a person's heart hard towards other things the LORD has to say. That is truly sad because God commands all that He does for our highest good. God is not keeping us from something good with His laws (the devil wants you to believe that to your destruction), God is giving us goodness and blessing by commanding all that He does. That is why the psalmist writes what he does in verse 4. This is a critical verse to see and understand. You see there is something more to see than God giving good commands, we also need to see that...]

Point #2 – God must command obedience. (Verses 4)

There is more to the LORD's instructions than helpful advice, there is absolute necessity in following His ways.

There is a change in verse 4 from the third person to the second person.

He goes from talking about people who are blessed by walking in God's ways to talking to the LORD directly.

Look with me at what it says in **verse 4**.

It is important to see when God gives this command.

It happens in the past but the original language means more than the past it is also something that is ongoing in the present.

That makes sense given what the prophet Isaiah says about God's word. He says, "...*the word of our God will stand forever.*" (Isa. 40:8 ESV)

God's command to keep His word is for all time and into eternity.

It is also important to see how the Lord commands His precepts (rules that govern how we live) to be kept.

It says, He commands them to be kept ‘diligently’ that suggests fullness and constancy.

They are to be obeyed in every detail all the time.

If you are thinking, “That’s impossible!” You are thinking rightly. Only Jesus has lived up to the command of *verse 4* which is why we need Him as our Saviour if we are to have any hope in life and death.

We need to see that we fall short here and need Jesus, but we also need to ask, why has God commanded that we keep His rules completely and all the time?

To answer that question it is helpful to ask another question.

Does God give commands because they are good or does God giving the commands make them good?

Some religions conceive of a god or gods that bring morality into being by what they command and that if they wanted to they could command the opposite and then the opposite would then be good.

The real and living God of the universe is different.

When the LORD gives a command He is not bringing morality into existence, He is revealing the morality of His own nature which has existed for all eternity.

The reason why God’s word stands forever, as Isaiah says, is because God remains the same forever.

God reveals Who He is, Who He has always been, and always will be in the laws that He gives.

If then He fails to command obedience to His precepts He denies His own goodness which is impossible for Him to do.

[If you have ever wondered why God put a tree in the Garden of Eden and commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of it, it is because God’s purpose in creation is to make His glory known. One aspect to His glory is His perfect justice and justice requires a law that must be obeyed. God must always be all that He is in all His infinite greatness and so He must command obedience. That brings the psalmist to turn his attention to himself. The desire that he expresses in verses five and six show us that...]

Point #3 – Consistency is essential to enjoying the blessing of obedience. (Verses 5-6)

Since God’s laws are objectively good, the more they are followed the more their goodness is experienced.

Verse 5 gives us some insight into the psalmist’s desire for himself.

It sounds like he has a deep desire here.

As he thinks about his life, what he really wants is to be ‘steadfast’ in living his life according to God’s moral direction.

To be ‘steadfast’ is to be firmly established or fixed in place.

This is similar to the image Jesus gives at the end of the Sermon on the Mount.

He says the one who listens to His teaching and does it is like a man who builds His house on the rock. The rain falls, the flood comes, and the wind blows but the house does not fall.

In the same way, the psalmist desires that no matter what happens the way of his life will be fixed to God's instructions.

Day in and day out, in every circumstance great and small he wants to keep the law of the LORD.

This will be the result of doing that. (Verse 6)

Some commentators think the way to understand the word 'shame' here is to see it as utter ruin or being abandoned by God.

So his confidence in the outcome of obedience is believing that almighty God is faithful to His word.

That God will vindicate those who obey what He says.

In other words the LORD will prove His ways true if you stick with Him.

Consistency is the key here.

This is not true for someone who is all over the place when it comes to listening to the LORD.

[Let's just take telling the truth for example. Let's say there is a child that consistently tells his mom the truth and it just so happens ten Christmas cookies go missing and he says, "It wasn't me!" Odds are his mom will believe him and move on to the next suspect. On the other hand if it turns out that the boy did in fact eat the Christmas cookies and is caught in the lie, how likely is it that he will be believed the next time something similar happens? There is going to be doubts right. When he breaks his consistent obedience he hurts his ability to enjoy the blessing of his obedience.]

That is the unavoidable cause and effect of obeying or disobeying God's instructions.

The more we obey the more we get to enjoy the fruit of that obedience.

Every time we disobey it robs us of the joy of obedience.

Listen, more often than not it is hard to do what God says.

There is temptation, there is our own evil desires, and there is often a cost in the short term.

While it may be harder in the short term it is always better in the long term.

[I have yet to hear anyone come into my office and say, "I really wish I had listened less to God." No one ever says, "You know the real problem with my marriage and family is that we are all obeying God too much!" Believe me it is very much the opposite. What is so amazing to me is how gracious God is to us in this process. If anything is clear in this passage it is our

need for grace because none of us obeys all of God's laws, not even close. Even though that is the case God is incredibly passionate about His word and even our meagre obedience results in good things. We get a glimpse of that in verse seven where we learn that...]

Point #4 – Worship is the fruit of obedience. (Verse 7)

When we trust the LORD and order our lives according to His Word and therefore experience His goodness we will praise Him.

Having expressed his desire for consistent obedience in verses 5-6 he looks to the future in verse 7.

The word praise here is a praise of thanksgiving.

He is going to worship the LORD in thankfulness with a heart of integrity.

What he will say with the words that will come out of his mouth will be consistent with how he is feeling in his inner most being.

That is going to happen, he says, 'when [he] learns [God's] righteous rules.'

I think it is safe to say that he means more by the word 'learn' than simply committing these rules to memory.

This kind of learning is the kind of learning that happens with training.

[I googled earlier this week, "How many people watched the 2024 Olympics?" The estimate of one website was 5 billion people. The number of athletes that participated in the Olympics was a little over 10000. It is one thing to watch the Olympics from your coach and say, "I can't believe how weak, or slow, or small some of those athletes are!" It is another thing to be there running the race or lifting the weights. The slowest Olympian is way faster than the fastest coach potato. Why? Because they have done more than just learn their sport in their head, they have trained to get to the Olympics.]

Spiritually speaking that is what the psalmist has in mind here regarding God's 'righteous rules.'

He has done more than read about them in the Bible.

Of course that is super important. It is impossible to live the word of God without knowing the word of God.

But the kind of praise/thanksgiving talked about here is the kind that comes from practically experiencing the goodness of God's law.

Again, it is so important to keep grace in mind here.

The longing in verse 5 for his ways to be steadfast implies that they have not been steadfast in the past.

The 'learning' of God's 'righteous rules' are future oriented in verse 7 meaning he still has lots to learn.

God's standard is without a doubt perfection and so if He offered no grace to anyone we would all be lost and there would be no blessing, joy, or worship.

When we experience anything good from listening to God we should never think, "Thanks God for doing what I deserve because I just nailed it today!"

Instead we should say, "God thank you that your ways are so incredibly good that they work even though my efforts are so poor.

God thank you for showing me so much kindness that you give me opportunity after opportunity to seek your face and experience your goodness."

[Something I have said to the LORD a number of times in recent days is, "Lord thank you that your Word is so awesome even though I'm not!" When we taste and see that the LORD is good how can we do anything else but thank Him? Self-righteousness doesn't make any sense when we consider God's law. Grace is the only thing that makes loving God's word possible. That, I believe, is the right way to see verse eight and if we see it that way we will see that...]

Point #5 – God is faithful to those who love His word. (Verse 8)

Our greatest hope in loving what the LORD says, is His relentless commitment to Himself.

This last sentence of this opening section of psalm 119 begins with a word that is not translated in English because English does not have an equivalent.

Of course it works with the author's desire to start each of the first eight verses with a word that begins with the Hebrew letter aleph, but it also serves to put an exclamation point on this opening stanza.

The function of the word in the sentence is to make the word it is connected to be the direct object of the verb in the sentence.

In this case it also helps to move that word to the beginning of the sentence for emphasis.

The first half of verse eight says "I will keep your statutes" because that sounds better in English, but in Hebrew 'Your statutes' comes first because that is the focus here.

He deeply wants to be the one described in verses 1-3.

He wants to be truly blessed and the only way that is really possible is by walking with his whole heart in the law of the LORD.

That is his desire, but he also knows he is someone in need (Verse 8).

If he were confident in his own ability to keep God's statutes it wouldn't make sense for him to pray like this.

Without a doubt he knows Deuteronomy 31:8 which says these amazing words to God's people.

It says, "*It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.*" (Deut. 31:8 ESV)

The psalmist here is praying according to that promise.

He knows if it is all up to him then he is going to fail.

He knows if it all depends on him then all is lost.

He is saying God, I need you to live out a love for your word.

He is pleading with God to be faithful to His promises.

That is one of the best prayers anyone can pray because God will always keep that promise.

If you seek His face in His word He will “never leave you or forsake you.”

Someone might say, “How can I trust that?”

You can trust that by trusting in the one Who kept the law of the LORD perfectly, Who took the penalty of all your failures for you by dying on a cross, who rose again and who in heaven pleads the case of His people with His nail pierced hands.

If you have the obedience of Jesus covering your disobedience then God will never forsake you.

Instead the Holy Spirit will work in you through the power of God’s word so that your new found obedience will benefit you, so that you can actually obey what the LORD must command, so that you will walk in His ways more consistently, and be moved to thanksgiving and praise to the God who is always faithful.

Don’t you want that?

If you do you need to do at least two basic things.

One, read the Bible on a regular basis. Have a plan to read through the whole bible cover to cover.

There are lots of plans available. I’m a fan of the Olive Tree app which gives you many different options.

Get a plan that gets you into the whole of God’s word regularly.

Second, plead with the LORD to shape your life according to a right understanding of His Word.

I believe He is happy to answer that prayer and that will change your life.

Whoever you are, whatever you do, wherever you live, you can be walking in the Law of the LORD and there is nothing better than that.