

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 18, 2015

**THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:  
THE WORD OF GOD (2)**

**Psalm 119:89-105**

This morning we continue the examination we began last Sunday of the EPC *Essentials of Our Faith*. In doing so, I invite you to turn in your Bible or in one of the pew Bibles to Psalm 119, as we look together at verses 89-105. Together, let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

**PSALM 119**

Psalm 119, as you probably know, is the answer to the question: What is the longest chapter in the Bible? Not only the longest of the psalms, with its 176 verses, Psalm 119 is the longest single chapter in the Old and New Testaments. It is an extended meditation on the Word of God, extolling the unparalleled beauty of God's Word and attesting to its indispensable value for living in this world. Its theme, in the words of one biblical scholar (Derek Kidner), is "the rich and precious jewel" of God's Word.

The psalm is divided into 22 stanzas, one for each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, with each stanza consisting of eight verses. It doesn't translate into English this way, but within each stanza, the first word of every verse begins with the same Hebrew letter – the letter to which each stanza corresponds. So, the first word in each of the first eight verses begins with the letter *aleph*. In verses 9-16, the first word in each verse begins with *beth*. And so on, through the entire Hebrew alphabet. As with a number of the psalms, the human author of Psalm 119 is not identified. Though we don't know who wrote it, the fact of its God-breathedness by the Holy Spirit is clearly evident to the eye of faith.

Like Psalm 19, in which David sings the praises of God's Word using several different words or expressions, such as *the law of the LORD*, *the statutes of the LORD*, *the precepts of the LORD*, *the commands of the LORD*, and *the ordinances of the LORD* (19:7-9), Psalm 119 is dominated by eight synonyms that all refer to the Word of God in all its veracity, trustworthiness, wisdom, authority, and life-giving power. One of these synonyms is *law*, which translates the Hebrew word *torah*. *Torah* sometimes refers to a single command, sometimes to a whole body of law (such as the law God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai), and sometimes to the teaching of God's Word as a whole.

In addition to *law*, Psalm 119 highlights different facets of God's Word by means of such words as *statutes*, *precepts*, *promises*, *testimonies*, *commandments*, *ordinances*, and the word *word* (*dabar* in Hebrew). *Dabar* is the broadest, most inclusive term of them all, embracing God's revealed truth in any form – stated, promised, or commanded. In their own ways, all of these terms speak of God's revelation of Himself, His ways, and His will communicated to us in the Bible, in which God has spoken and through which God still speaks today.

## **GOD’S WORD IS ETERNAL**

In the portion of the psalm we read, beginning in verse 89, the psalmist speaks first of the enduring, eternal nature of God’s Word:

Your word, O LORD, is eternal;  
it stands firm in the heaven.  
Your faithfulness continues through all generations ....

It reminds me of these words:

*Great is Thy faithfulness, O God our Father!  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee.  
Thou changest not, Thy commandments they fail not;  
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be.  
(Thomas Chisholm)*

The psalm continues:

Your laws endure to this day,  
for all things serve You.  
(Psalm 119:89-91)

The psalmist isn’t alone in bearing witness to the eternal nature of God’s Word. Isaiah 40:8 testifies: “The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.” To the end of time and beyond.

In Matthew 24:35, Jesus Himself says: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” When will Jesus’ words and teaching no longer carry the weight of divine authority? What is their expiration date? When will the words and teaching of Jesus no longer make any claim on our lives? *Never*. Though heaven and earth will not last forever – they will someday be replaced by the new heaven and the new earth John writes about in Revelation 21 – the words and teaching of Jesus, and the teaching of the Bible (the written Word of God) as a whole, will *never* pass away. It will stand *forever*.

That is one reason we embrace the message and teaching of the Bible. It is one reason we pledge our allegiance to the infallible, unfailingly true and trustworthy, unerring, Holy Spirit-inspired Word of God. Human philosophies, ideas, words, and dreams will eventually all die. They will not last forever. But God’s Word will not disappear. It will not end up on the ash heap of history. It will never expire. Like God Himself, His Word will stand forever.

## **GOD’S WORD WILL NOT FAIL**

Listen also to what the Lord says in Isaiah 55:

My word that goes out from my mouth

will not return to me empty,  
but will accomplish what I desire  
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.  
(Isaiah 55:11)

Though in our world the wrong seems oft so strong, though the current of evil may seem unstoppable, though it sometimes seems like the world is careening out of control, about to go over a cliff into oblivion, God's Word is not obsolete. The truth and power of His Word will not be nullified. The promises of His Word will not fail. His promises to you will not fail. The what and when and how are in God's hands, but His Word will succeed in the purposes for which He sends it out. We embrace the Bible and pledge our allegiance to live by it because we believe it to be *God's Word*.

It is sometimes said that people like us who hold to a high view of the Bible's inspiration, trustworthiness, and authority are actually guilty of idol worship by making the Bible itself the object of our worship and veneration. It *can* happen. It *has* happened. You can put the Bible up on such a high pedestal that it actually becomes an idol and takes the place in your life that belongs to God and God alone. Don't let it happen. It is not the Word of God that we worship, but the God of the Word, the true and living God who has revealed Himself, His ways, His will, His grace and truth – everything we need to know about Him and His saving love – in the Bible. The Word of God points us unfailingly to the God whose Word it is.

### **GOD'S WORD GIVES WISDOM**

In the next stanza (Psalm 119:97-104), the psalmist goes on to tell us that God's Word gives us wisdom. Listen to his exclamation to the Lord in verse 97: "Oh, how I love your law!"

"Oh, how I love Your word!"

"Oh, how I love all You've revealed!" (*MSG*).

Do you share the psalmist's passion for the Word?

Why such enthusiasm, such devotion to God's Word?

Because, the psalmist says, it is the source of true wisdom and understanding. Knowledge and understanding are not the same thing. Knowledge and wisdom are not the same. The Bible is an invaluable source of knowledge. In the words of Emile Cailliet, as we noted last week, the Bible is "the book that understands (us)." It is the book that tells us the truth about God, about the world, about ourselves, about sin, suffering, rebellion, and redemption, about life and death, right and wrong, good and evil, justice, mercy, love, and grace. It tells the truth about the predicament of sinful human beings who can never do enough or be good enough to earn God's favor and love. And it tells the truth about what God in His unstoppable love has done about it.

Of course, knowing what the Bible teaches matters. Ignorance is neither bliss nor virtue. But what matters just as much, or more, is what we do with the knowledge we have. Knowing the

facts of the Bible will never save you. It will never save anyone. You can amass a mountain of knowledge. But if you don't know what to do with it, what good is it in the end? Wisdom has to do with rightly applying knowledge to life. Wisdom and understanding are found in letting the message and teachings of the Bible shape our lives, our priorities, our commitments, our desires, our attitudes and actions. Eugene Peterson has written that we Christians dare not "treat the Bible as if it were (just) a warehouse of information, oblivious to the obvious – that it is given to us as text intended to form a whole life to the glory of God."

Yes, the Bible is full of information. Invaluable information. Information essential to our salvation and spiritual well-being. At the same time, the Bible is not meant simply to inform us, and thereby to become a source of self-promoting pride in us as we celebrate the superiority of our knowledge of the Bible to that of others. I know something about that. I've been there and done it. I've used my Bible knowledge to show off. It is not very pretty.

### **THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S WORD**

The Bible is not given simply to *inform* us but rather to *form* us and *transform* us by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us in and through the Word of God. God uses His Word – His law, His promises, His commands and precepts, His ordinances and statutes, and His gospel of grace – to form and shape us as His own beloved children, and to transform us more and more into the likeness of Jesus our Savior.

### **OUR DEFENSE AGAINST TEMPTATION AND SIN**

His Word at work in us causes us to increase in wisdom, understanding, and insight for living. His Word at work in us, as it says in verse 100, keeps us out of the "ditches and ruts of evil" (*MSG*).

Earlier in Psalm 119, in verse 9, the psalmist asks the question: "How can a young man keep his way pure?" How can a young woman keep her way pure? This question is not for the young only. How can men and women in mid-life, when life is not turning out the way they had planned, keep their way pure? How can old men and old women in the twilight of this life, stay on course and continue to honor God to the end?

What is the psalmist's answer? "By living according to (God's) Word." "By carefully reading", inwardly digesting, and following "the map of (His) Word" (*MSG*). By allowing God's Word not only to inform your life, but to form it and transform it for His glorious purposes. Knowing God's Word and keeping it in our hearts will keep us from sin, as the psalmist says in verse 11.

Think of Jesus in the wilderness. When He was tempted by Satan, how did Jesus respond? The devil took his best shots at Jesus, and each time Jesus stood firm. He refused to give the enemy even an inch. Each time He said to Satan; "It is written." He appealed to the truth and authority of God's Word. He showed that the Word of God is our best defense against temptation.

## **THE INSTRUMENT OF SALVATION**

But there is more. We embrace the Bible because it is the instrument of salvation. It leads us to salvation because it leads us to the Savior. It leads us to a right relationship with God by leading us to the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul bears witness to this when he says in 2 Timothy 3:15 that the Scriptures are able to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

## **METABOLIZING THE WORD**

But that is not all. Listen again to Eugene Peterson as he speaks of the role of God’s Word in our lives: “Christians do not simply learn or study or use Scripture; we assimilate it. (We) take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus’ name, hands raised in adoration of the Father.” Yes, Lord, let it be so!

The Bible gives truth, wisdom, understanding, insight – for life. That is why we embrace it as the Word of God. Or why we should.

## **GOD’S WORD GIVES US LIGHT**

One more thing to mention from Psalm 119: In verse 105, the psalmist says:

Your word is a lamp to my feet  
and a light for my path.

The Bible gives us light to know which way to go and which way not to go as we journey through this life. If you find yourself in the pitch-black darkness of an unfamiliar place, or even a familiar one, it can be scary. If you’re driving on an isolated country road at night, you need your car lights to illumine the way. A flashlight with good batteries is not a luxury when you are camping in the woods. It is a necessity. As is God’s Word, as it lights the way for us to go and exposes the dangers, pitfalls, and snares to avoid. Rarely does the Lord illumine the entire way for us all at once. But He does give us the light we need for every situation. One step at a time. By means of His Word, the Lord our Shepherd leads us in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake (Ps. 23:3).

## **GOD’S WORD GIVES US COMFORT AND HOPE**

In addition to all these things, the Bible has been and remains a source of great comfort, encouragement, and hope in troubled times. When you are dealing with the loss of a loved one and you are filled with grief, when you are facing a crisis in your life, when life itself is hard, when you feel discouraged, when your heart is hurting, what you need more than anything is to hear the voice of God speaking to you. God’s Word is what you need. It is there, in the Word of God, that we find the message of comfort and hope, assurance, trust, and triumph to sustain us and carry us through the dark and stormy nights of our souls.

## **PRAYERS OF HAITIAN CHRISTIANS**

It was my privilege to go to Haiti last April with our Haiti Mission Team. I look forward to going back with this year's team during Holy Week. Recently I came across some prayers of Haitian Christians focusing on the Word of God and its role in our lives. Listen closely to the words of these prayers:

Our Great Physician, Your word is like alcohol.  
When poured on an infected wound, it burns and stings.  
But only then can it kill germs.  
If it doesn't burn, it doesn't do any good.

Father, we are all hungry birds this morning.  
Our heart-mouths are gaping wide, waiting for You to fill us.

Father, a cold wind seems to have chilled us.  
Wrap us in the blanket of Your word and warm us up.

Lord, we find Your word like cabbage.  
As we pull down the leaves, we get closer to the heart.  
And as we get closer to the heart, it is sweeter.

(Wally and Eleanor Turnbull, *God Is No Stranger*, pp. 14, 18, 56, 92)

## **LORD, LET IT BE SO**

It may not be the way we tend to think of the Bible, but all of these prayers, and all I have spoken about today, affirm and confirm the nature and the power of the Word of God for your life and mine.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.