
A Lamp Unto My Feet: The Doctrine of Scripture in Psalm 119

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What is Psalm 119 all about? This question seems to have an obvious and ready answer. Psalm 119 is about the power, purity, and perfection of God's word. Throughout 176 verses it never wavers from this theme, and by its sheer mass Psalm 119 brings this unmistakable emphasis to the Psalter, to the Old Testament, and to the Bible itself. It is a psalm that teaches us the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, and it exhorts us to cherish the word of God in the life of faith. But this psalm is not merely a treatise on the doctrine of Scripture. It is that in some respects, but it is also much more than that. Our first clue to look deeper comes from listening to the repetitions that bind this enormous psalm together.

Even though every verse of Psalm 119 extols the statutes, precepts, commandments, and judgements of God, there are words that occur more frequently than these. The most frequently repeated words in this psalm are not the rich variety of synonyms for Scripture, but the first-person pronouns—"I," "me," and "my," along with the second person pronouns "You" and "Your" (always with a capital "Y"). Look at almost any verse in Psalm 119 and you will find a first-person reference to "me" and a second-person reference to "You." This is a psalm about a relationship; a psalm about "You" and "me," and you will find those pronouns (or a variation of them) in nearly every verse. This psalm is about a relationship of faith and love, between God and man, that is sustained and strengthened by the word of God.

The pronoun "You" is always capitalized because it is a reference to God, but who is the "I," the "me," the speaker of this psalm? Some say that it is David, although the psalm is technically anonymous. Many view the human author, whether it was David or not, as a spokesman for all believers who gives us an example to emulate, and it is certainly true that the love for God and His word expressed here in this psalm is something for us to diligently cultivate in our own lives.

And yet this towering first-person presence in Psalm 119 points to something more. Self-references are not uncommon in the Psalter, but Psalm 119 is saturated with them in almost every verse. The inescapable impression is that this psalm is as much about the speaker's love and obedience to God's word as it is about God's word itself. This psalm is not just about the doctrine of Scripture in the abstract; it is about how "I" have embraced it, obeyed it, cherished it, kept it, and loved it. The speaker is the actor in nearly every verse, and every verb is an exhibit of his faith in God and his trust in God's word. So, who is this speaker who takes center stage as *the* lover of God's word, in a psalm which has no attribution of human authorship?

We get our next clue by understanding the nature of the Psalter itself. The Psalms occupy a unique place in the messianic expectation of the Old Testament, for it is in the Psalter that we most often hear the voice of the Messiah Himself. Peter called this "the Spirit of Christ" speaking through the prophets (1 Pet. 1:11, NKJV). The first-person singular voice in the psalms, which often arises from

David as a type of Christ, is freely attributed to Christ himself by the New Testament writers.¹ The testimony of the Messiah's person and work in the psalms meets us almost entirely in the first-person singular voice,² and the New Testament assumes that we will hear that voice as the "word of Christ," which is what the apostle Paul calls the psalms in Colossians 3:16.³

We may debate how clearly the original audience understood that singular voice as their Messiah, but we can be certain that this was no novel hermeneutic on the part of the apostles. For the New Testament writers to simply attribute that voice in the Psalter to the Messiah in an entirely unprecedented way would have undermined the whole apostolic argument about Christ's identity from the Old Testament.⁴

The point we are making is that Christ himself often speaks in the Old Testament, and particularly in the Psalms, as the anticipated Savior and representative of his people. This is not to say that every first-person singular voice we hear in the Psalms is that of the Messiah—the inspired human authors are given room enough to speak as individuals. But it does mean that when the shepherd finally came, his sheep already knew the sound of his voice from the Scriptures (John 10:3–5). The ancient church was not only given a prophetic word *about* Christ, but a comforting word *from* him as they awaited his advent. According to Christ himself, the whole Old Testament has the singular and unifying purpose of testifying to him (Luke 24:44; John 5:39). This testimony takes on a rich variety of forms, but one of the richest is the voice of the Savior himself that we often hear in the Psalter.

In some Psalms the voice of the human author is most prominent, such as in Psalm 51, where David confesses and repents of his sin. But there are many times when we can unmistakably make out the voice of our Savior, when he speaks of his personal righteousness and justice, his affliction and vindication, his perfect obedience, or his kingship over the nations. This voice of Christ is very distinct in different places in Psalm 119. While the speaker offers many praises and prayers that make him an example of faith for us to follow, he also pictures himself as the *object* of the faith of God's people. In these moments it becomes unmistakable that Psalm 119 is the word of Christ, and it is primarily about *His* perfect love for and obedience to the word of God.

Christ Our Joy

One such moment comes in verse 74, where he says that "Those who fear You will be glad when they see me, because I have hoped in Your word." Some commentators take this verse in a general sense referring to how believers take joy in each other's company, but the verse is much more specific than that. All believers are pictured as having a singular, mutual joy when they see this one man, the speaker of the psalm. The joy of all of God's people is invested in *him*. He is not talking about the fellowship of the saints; he is calling *himself* the wellspring of joy to all of God's

¹ For a few examples see Acts 2:25-32, John 15:25, and Hebrews 2:12.

² Such as, for instance, Christ's persecution (Ps. 35:19), betrayal (Ps. 41:9), and crucifixion (Ps. 22:16–18).

³ In Colossians 3:16 Paul equates our singing of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" specifically with the *word of Christ* dwelling in us richly. While some see these three terms referring to both biblical psalms and extra-biblical songs, their collective characterization as the "word of Christ" urges us to see them in the same light, as both divinely inspired and uniquely messianic. There is good reason to see these three Pauline terms arising from the variety of psalm titles within the Psalter itself. See Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, 1993).

⁴ For a study of the first-person messianic voice in the Psalter see James E. Adams book, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*. Adams concludes, "Further intense investigation bears out that the "I," the author of the Psalms, is Christ himself. He is the great voice we hear in the Psalms crying out in prayer to God the Father." James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2016), 25.

people. Furthermore, he says that it is the fear of the Lord that moves us to rejoice in him: “Those who fear You will rejoice when they see me...” The natural corollary to the fear of the Lord is that we will rejoice in this one man, who can only be the Lord Jesus Christ.

He goes on in verse 74 to speak of the *occasion* of our joy in him, and the *reason* for our joy in him. The occasion of our joy in him will be a specific moment—“when they see me.” It is not “whenever they see me,” as if God’s people were accustomed to seeing him from time to time. The speaker is talking about an anticipated moment when he will be revealed. The implication is that God’s people had not yet seen him, but when they do, they will rejoice. The most precious promise of our Lord, and the greatest expectation that we have, is that one day we will see the Lord Jesus Christ, and we will surely rejoice when we do. This was the joyful expectation of Old Testament believers, such as Job, who found hope in the promise that one day he would be resurrected and see his Redeemer with his own eyes (Job 19:27). This is also our joyful expectation. 1 John 2:3 says that we will one day see him as he truly is, and this is our great hope. The promise that we will see him and rejoice is described from Christ’s own perspective in Psalm 119:74: “Those who fear You will be glad when they see me.” In this verse, Christ promises that we will see him, and we will rejoice, just like Abraham, of whom Christ said, he “rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

The *reason* we will rejoice when we see him is also given: “Because I have hoped in Your word.” There will be many reasons for us to rejoice when we see Christ, but this will be one of the greatest—that he hoped in God’s word. He was faithful. He trusted the Lord and never doubted the Father’s promises. This is the reason we have hope! It is because Christ hoped in God’s word. Can you imagine where you and I would be if Christ did not hope in God’s word? We would be lost and undone, with no reason to rejoice. But this is a wonderful thing to contemplate: when we finally see our Savior, we will be glad most of all that he did hope in God’s word.

His hope will prove to be more than enough to cover our doubts, and this is a great comfort to us even now. Have you ever doubted God’s word or his promises, even just a little? We are very weak creatures, and our hope is a fragile thing at best. So do not trust in yourself to have all the hope you will ever need. Our hope in God’s word must and will grow in the life of faith, but it will never be perfect in this world. Thus, trust in Christ, and cling to him in faith, because it is he who says, “I have hoped in Your word.” His hope is perfect. His trust in God’s word never wavered. He never doubted God’s promises. If your hope is weak, cling to him in faith, and in his hope, you will find hope. Then when you see him at last you will rejoice, not because your hope was anything, but because his hope in God’s word will prove to be everything. His hope is more than enough to cover your doubts and fears and replace them with joy when you see him.

Christ our Trust

Another point in Psalm 119 where we unmistakably hear the voice of our Savior is in verse 79: “Let those who fear You turn to me, those who know your testimonies.” As with verse 74, this verse begins by identifying God’s people as “those who fear the Lord.” And once again, this verse identifies a natural and necessary corollary to the fear of the Lord. There is an unbreakable equation of cause and effect, of condition and consequence: “Let those who fear *You* turn to *me*.” These two things must, of necessity, go together. Who else could say such words except the Lord Jesus Christ? The fact is that a person cannot fear the Lord and have salvation from him without turning to Jesus Christ in faith. The Apostle John put it this way in 1 John 2:23: “Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either. He who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” The Son of God himself puts the very same point this way in verse 79: “Let those who fear You turn to me.” This succinct statement is the gospel in its irreducible form, in all of its power and simplicity. This is God’s call to all men everywhere. If your desire is to know God and to truly fear him in faith, you must turn to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, what is envisioned by this phrase “turn to me”? The Hebrew verb שׁוּב means to “turn” or to “return” and is often used in narratives as such, but it is predominantly used as a metaphor for the spiritual act of placing faith in the Lord. Many times, especially in the Prophets, God calls people to turn to him, or to return to him, and this is the verb that is used in those contexts of a divine call to repentance and faith. The command “turn to me” is the gospel call of the Old Testament, and a form of divine speech no less unmistakable than the phrase “I am.” There are some things that only God can say, and one of them is “turn to Me!” For instance, God says in Joel 2:12, “Turn to Me with all your heart”—using the verb שׁוּב, calling people to repentance and faith in him.

In Psalm 119:79 where the speaker says, “Let those who fear You turn to me,” we know that no mere man can say such a thing. Only the Son of God, who himself is God, and has the authority of God, can say “turn to me” and expect men to do so. And this again is the essence of the gospel. Those who fear the Lord will turn to Christ, and keep turning to Christ, day by day. This point is also implicit in verse 79, because the form of the verb שׁוּב (here יִשׁוּבוּ) is jussive, which expresses the speaker’s will or desire (“Let those...”), as well as imperfect, which is a verbal form that denotes incomplete or ongoing action. What is envisioned is a continual turning to him, either all of God’s people throughout history, or each one of God’s people throughout his life, or, most likely, both.

Turning to Christ is the principal thing, and it is something that he calls us to do continually. This verse is the pinnacle of the gospel call in Psalm 119, given in Christ’s own words. The book of Proverbs tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but this verse tells us that the beginning of the fear of the Lord is to turn to Jesus Christ.

Verse 79 ends with an addendum that further describes those who fear the Lord and turn to Christ. There is one more thing to say about them; they are “Those who know Your testimonies.” This brings us back to one of the main themes of Psalm 119, which is how the Word of God is such an important blessing and means of grace in the life of faith. It is vitally important that this verse intertwines the knowledge of God’s Word with the fear of the Lord and turning to Christ. You would be hard pressed to find a more succinct description of God’s people than we see in verse 79: They fear the Lord, they turn to Christ, and they know the Word.

Christ the Suffering Servant

The two verses on which we have focused much of our attention here give us a hermeneutical vantage point from which to view the rest of Psalm 119. Moving beyond those verses where Christ is speaking, we can now hear the rest of the psalm in his voice and see how Psalm 119 comes alive with the active obedience of Christ, which he rendered to the Father on our behalf for our salvation.

It should now strike us in a new way that the speaker of Psalm 119 refers to himself repeatedly as “Your servant” (vss. 17, 23, 38, 49, 65, 76, 84, 122, 124, 125, 135, 140, and 176). This is not incidental, nor is it a generality. This title implies a singular calling and a unique relationship to the Father, who likewise calls the Son “My servant” repeatedly in the Servant Songs of Isaiah.⁵ There are many servants of the Lord, but there is only one Servant of the Lord.

This Servant’s claims of perfect love for and obedience to the Word of God now come into focus for what they really are in Psalm 119—not just an ideal held forth to us, but a reality in the life of Christ, the Servant of the Lord. For instance, take verses 101 and 102: “I have restrained my feet from every evil way that I may keep Your word. I have not departed from Your judgements, for

⁵ Isaiah 42:1; 49:3, 5, and 6; 52:13, and 53:11. See also Isaiah 50:10 where “His Servant” is referring to the speaker of verse 4 and following.

You Yourself have taught me.” This is not a mere man simply giving us the best estimate of himself. This kind of unequivocal language is found throughout Psalm 119, and what emerges is nothing less than a prophetic picture of the perfect obedience of Christ.

Besides such direct language that we must read at face value, there is another aspect of Psalm 119 that is often overlooked. This is not a psalm simply about one man’s obedience to the word. It is a psalm about one man’s *perfect* obedience to the word while being constantly persecuted on every side. Consider just a sampling of this theme:

The proud have me in great derision, yet I do not turn aside from Your law (Ps. 119:51).

The cords of the wicked have bound me, but I have not forgotten Your law (Ps. 119:61).

The proud have forged a lie against me, but I will keep your precepts with my whole heart (Ps. 119:69).

The wicked wait for me to destroy me, but I will consider Your testimonies (Ps. 119:95).

The wicked have laid a snare for me, yet I have not strayed from Your precepts (Ps. 119:110).

Many are my persecutors and enemies, yet I do not turn from Your testimonies (Ps. 119:157).

Notice that in every instance there is an antithetical parallelism that draws the sharpest contrast between the scheming world of wicked men and the perfect obedience of the speaker. The perfect obedience that this psalm portrays is constantly tested by a world of persecutors, which we see come to pass at every turn in the gospels. Christ’s enemies continuously plotted against him, but he remained faithful to the Father’s word.

Not only that, but we see rulers take counsel together against this Servant of the Lord. Verse 23 says, “Princes also sit and speak against me, but Your servant meditates on Your statutes.” Verse 161 says something similar: “Princes persecute me without a cause, but my heart stands in awe of Your word.” We see that persecution of rulers unfold in the gospels, and we cannot fail to notice that being hated or persecuted “without cause” is a messianic theme found also in other Psalms, such as Psalms 35, 69, and 109. When Jesus spoke of the hatred of the world against him in John 15, he said that it was so it might be fulfilled what was written, “They hated me without a cause” (John 15:25). Likewise, the Psalmist says in verse 161 that “Princes persecute me without a cause.”

There are other echoes of Psalm 119 in the life and words of Christ as recorded in the gospels. For instance, Psalm 119:115 says, “Depart from me you evildoers, for I will keep the commandments of my God!” In Matthew 7:23 we find that it is Christ who says, “Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” We saw earlier in verse 79 that only Christ has the authority to say, “Turn to me.” Now we see also that only Christ has the authority to say, “Depart from me!” We hear another echo in verse 139, which says, “My zeal has consumed me, because my enemies have forgotten Your word.” How can we not think of the Messiah’s zeal, likewise envisioned in Psalm 69, and put on full display in John 2 when he drove out the merchants and moneychangers from the temple.

But perhaps the most moving connection we can make is with Hebrews 5:8, which says that Christ “learned obedience by the things which He suffered.” In Psalm 119:71 we hear the Savior say: “It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.” As a Son and as a true

man, the one who never disobeyed still had to learn obedience through affliction, and he says it was *good* that he did. How could we ever view our own afflictions in any other way? Christ teaches us that if any affliction causes us to learn God's statutes, then we may say, as he did, "it is good for me that I have been afflicted."

Christ the Sin Bearer

While this psalm is a testimony of perfect love for and obedience to God's Word, there are a few verses for which we must account where the speaker talks of going astray like a sheep, such as verse 67 ("Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word") and verse 176 ("I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant, for I do not forget your commandments").

We might simply attribute these lines to the experience of the human author, whether it was David or someone else. However, a confession of going astray does not preclude the voice of the sinless Messiah. In fact, the guilt of sin is often portrayed in the Psalms as personally felt and owned in the vicarious experience of the one who "became sin for us" (1 Cor. 5:21). When the Lord "laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6), it was not some theologically esoteric transaction. The Messiah was to *own* our sin in the eyes of God, and he freely speaks of it as his own. For example, Psalm 69, which rings with the first-person voice of the Messiah throughout, and is attributed to Christ in all four Gospels, contains this jarring confession: "O God, You know my foolishness; and my sins are not hidden from You" (Ps. 69:5).⁶ This is the same one who said in the same psalm, "Zeal for Your house has eaten me up, and the reproaches of those who reproach You have fallen on me" (Ps. 69:9; John 2:17; Rom. 15:3). Likewise, in Psalm 119, the one who says, "Let those who fear You turn to me," is the same one who says, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep."

Here we see the shepherd identifying with his sheep, who have all gone astray, according to Isaiah 53:6. Yet in verse 176, the last verse of the psalm, after he says, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep," he says in the same breath, in the same verse, "I do not forget Your commandments." It would seem that forgetting God's commandments is the very definition of going astray. So perhaps in this bifurcated image we see another picture that only Christ could fulfill. He does not forget God's word, which means he obeys it, but at the same time he identifies with the straying sheep whom he has come to save. This last verse of Psalm 119 leaves us with the subtle but real impression that the perfect obedience described throughout this psalm is undertaken on behalf of others who cannot achieve it.

Conclusion

This leads us to our conclusion, that Psalm 119 is not only about the perfection of God's written Word, but it is about the perfection of the incarnate Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. We could build a comprehensive doctrine of Scripture from this one psalm, identifying verses that speak to the inerrancy, infallibility, and perspicuity of God's Word, but to do only that would stop short of the full message of Psalm 119. The full message of this psalm is that, of all the perfections of God's word, the greatest adornment to the word of God is Christ's perfect obedience to it.

Paul said in Titus 2:9 that servants who are obedient and faithful adorn the doctrine of God our Savior. Think of what it means to adorn a doctrine. It is to make it beautiful and attractive. When it comes to the doctrine of Scripture we can affirm its infallibility, its inerrancy, and many other qualities. But what adorns our doctrine of Scripture, what makes it beautiful and attractive? That

⁶ Commenting on this phenomenon in other messianic Psalms, Richard Belcher says, "Because Jesus is our substitute and takes our place it is appropriate for him to confess our sins as he bears them in his sacrificial death. In being 'answerable for our guilt' Christ vicariously confessed and repented in our behalf." Belcher, *The Messiah and the Psalms* (Rearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2006), 87.

is what Psalm 119 is about—how the perfect obedience of Christ is what adorns the Word of God as its crowning beauty.

His spotless obedience to God’s Word is what merits the positive righteousness with which we are covered when we put our faith in him. Our sins are paid for by his sacrifice, his passive obedience, and there are several psalms, like Psalms 22 and 69, that are devoted to his passive obedience. But Psalm 119 is the psalm of Christ’s *active* obedience. As his people, we are given the privilege of singing these words of Christ in Psalm 119 because the perfect obedience it describes is accounted as ours by faith in him.

It is no wonder, then, that Psalm 119 looms so large in the Psalter. Without the active obedience of Christ, we would have no hope. You may have heard the story of how J. Gresham Machen sent a telegram to John Murray from his deathbed that simply read, “So thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.” Psalm 119 underscores this hope, and the joy, that comes from having a perfect Savior. I conclude by returning to verse 74, which I think perfectly captures the joy that we have, and will have, in his perfect hope and obedience to God’s word, in the words of Christ himself: “Those who fear You will be glad when they see me, because I have hoped in Your word.”