

## Meditating on God's Law and Precepts – Psalm 119

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*,  
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Vol. IV, 405-411, 418, 419-473, 474-479; Vol. V, 42-44, emphasis added; updated to  
modern American English.

**Psalm 1:1-2** “Blessed *is* the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight *is* in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.”

**Psalm 119:5-7** “I wish that my ways may be directed to the observing of Your statutes! Then I shall not be ashamed, when I have respect to all Your precepts. I will praise You in the uprightness of my heart, when I shall have learned the judgments of Your righteousness.”

They who reverently respect His law, may not escape the censure of the majority of mankind, yet the prophet declares, that *They shall not be ashamed*, because they have a good conscience in the presence of God and the angels, and, with the approval of this celestial assembly, they are well satisfied and contented; for if they depended upon the opinion of the world, their courage would presently fail. He says, *all Your precepts*, meaning, that among the snares of Satan, amid such thick darkness and so great insensibility as ours, the utmost vigilance and caution are necessary, if we would aim at being entirely exempted from blame. Therefore, in all that we do, we must endeavor to have the law before us, to keep us from falling. . . .

. . . the prophet commends God's law on account of the thorough perfection of the doctrine contained in it. From this verse we learn, that none will praise God unfeignedly and cordially but he who has made such proficiency in His school as to mold his life into subjection to Him. It is vain to make a pretense of praising God with the mouth and the tongue if we dishonor Him by our life. Hence the prophet very justly here makes the fruit of genuine piety to consist in celebrating the praises of God without hypocrisy.

**Psalm 119:9** “How shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.”

[The Psalmist] declares that, when a person sets about the regulation of his life, no advice will prove of any advantage, unless he adopts the law of God as his rule and guide. In this way the prophet stimulates men to an early and seasonable regulation of their manners, and not to delay doing so any longer, agreeably to the words of Solomon, “Remember your Creator in your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years which shall be grief to you” (Ecclesiastes 12:1).

They who defer from time to time become hardened in their vicious practices, and arrive at mature years, when it is too late to attempt a reformation. There is another reason, arising from the fact, of the carnal propensities being very powerful in youth, requiring a double restraint; and the more they are inclined to excess, the greater is the necessity for curbing their licentiousness. The prophet, therefore, not without reason, exhorts them particularly to attend to the observance of the law.

We may reason from the greater to the less; for if the law of God possesses the power of restraining the impetuosity of youth, so as to preserve pure and upright all who take it for their guide, then, assuredly, when they come to maturity, and their irregular desires are considerably abated, it will prove the best antidote for correcting their vices. The reason, therefore, of so much evil prevailing in the world, arises from men wallowing in their own impurity, and being disposed to yield more to their own inclination than to heavenly instruction. **The only sure protection is, to regulate ourselves according to God's word.** Some, wise in their own conceit, throw themselves into the snares of Satan, others, from listlessness and languor, live a vile and wicked life.

**Psalm 119:11**

"Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You!"

. . . [As] frequently as David sets before us his own example, under this model he points out the course we ought to pursue. Here we are informed that we are well fortified against the stratagems of Satan when God's law is deeply seated in our hearts. For unless it have a fast and firm hold there, we will readily fall into sin. Among scholars, those whose knowledge is confined to books, if they have not the book always before them, they readily discover their ignorance; in like manner, if we do not imbibe the doctrine of God and remain well acquainted with it, Satan will easily surprise and entangle us in his meshes.

Our true safeguard, then, lies not in a slender knowledge of His law, or in a careless perusal of it, but in hiding it deeply in our hearts. Here we are reminded, that however men may be convinced of their own wisdom, they are yet destitute of all right judgment, except as far as they have God as their teacher.

**Psalm 119:15**

"I will meditate on Your precepts, and will take heed to Your paths."

We are aware that the majority of mankind are so much involved in the cares of the world, as to leave no time or leisure for **meditating upon the doctrine of God.** To meet this callous indifference, he very seasonably commends diligence and attention. And even were we not so ensnared by the world, we know how readily we lose sight of the law of God, in the daily temptations which suddenly overtake us.

It is not therefore without reason that **the prophet exhorts us to constant exercise, and enjoins us to direct all our energies to the subject of meditation on God's precepts.**

And as the life of men is unstable, being continually distracted by the carnality of their minds, he declares that he will consider attentively the *ways of God*. Subsequently, he repeats the exquisite pleasure he took in this pursuit. For **our proficiency in the law of God will be small, until we cheerfully and heartily set our minds upon it.** And, in fact, the commencement of a good life consists in God's law attracting us to Him by its sweetness. By the same means the lusts of the flesh, too, are subdued or mitigated. In our natural state, what is more agreeable to us than that which is sinful? This will be the constant tendency of our minds, unless the delight which we feel in the law carry us in the opposite direction.

**Psalm 119:24**

“Your testimonies also are my delight and my counselors.”

Guided by the word of God, and prudently yielding obedience to its dictates, there will then be no inlet to the deceits of our flesh, and to the delusions of the world, and we will stand invincible against all the assaults of temptation.

**Psalm 119:35**

“Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it.”

**Seeing that the end of man’s existence ought to consist in profiting in God’s school, we nevertheless perceive how the world distracts him by its allurements, and how he also forms for himself a thousand avocations [diversions, hobbies, activities] calculated to withdraw his thoughts from the main business of his life.**

The next clause of the verse, *in it I take pleasure*, must be carefully attended to. For it is an indication of rare excellence when a person so arranges his sentiments and affections as to renounce all the enticements pleasant to the flesh, and take delight in nothing so much as in the service of God.

The prophet had already attained to this virtue but he still perceives that he is not yet perfect. Therefore, that his desire may be fully accomplished, he solicits fresh assistance from God, according to the saying of Paul, “It is God who works in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasures” (Philippians 2:13). Let it be remembered, that he does not boast of the inherent working of his nature, but sets forth the grace he has received, that God may complete the work He has begun. “Lord, You have given me courage, grant me also strength.” . . .

**Psalm 119:51**

“The proud have me in great derision, yet I do not turn aside from Your law.”

Let us learn from these words, that the wicked, in consequence of their forming the great majority of mankind, arrogate to themselves the greater liberty. **The number of the godly who worship God reverently is always small.** Hence we must hold out against a large troop and rabble of the impious if we would maintain our integrity.

**Psalm 119:54**

“Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage.”

He repeats in different words what he had formerly mentioned, that **the law of God was his sole or special delight during all his life.**

Singing is an indication of joy. The saints are pilgrims in this world, and must be regarded as God’s children and heirs of heaven, from the fact that they are sojourners on earth.

By the *house of my pilgrimage*, then, may be understood his journey through life. One circumstance merits particular notice, that David, during his exile from his native country, ceased not to draw consolation, amid all his hardships, from the law of God, or rather a joy which rose above all the sadness which his banishment occasioned to him. It was a noble specimen of rare virtue, that when he was denied a sight of the temple, could not

draw near to the sacrifices, and was deprived of the ordinances of religion, he yet never departed from his God.

The phrase, the *house of my pilgrimage*, is employed, therefore, to enhance the conduct of David, who, when banished from his country, still retained the law of God deeply engraved on his heart, and who, amid the severity of that exile, which was calculated to deject his spirits, cheered himself by meditating upon the law of God.

**Psalm 119:55**

“By night I remembered Your name, O LORD! and I kept, Your law.”

David exhorts that the remembrance of God is the only remedy for preserving us in His fear, and in the observance of His law; and assuredly, as often as His majesty occurs to our minds, it will tend to humble us, and the very thought of it will provoke us to the cultivation of godliness.

**Psalm 119:71**

“It has been good for me that I was afflicted; that I might learn Your statutes.”

[David] preferred God’s law to all the riches of the world, the immoderate desire of which so deplorably infatuates the great bulk [the majority] of mankind. He does not compare the law of God with the riches he himself possessed; but he affirms, that it was more precious in his estimation than a vast inheritance.

**Those who love God’s law continually meditate upon it.**

**Psalm 119:97-104**

**97.** O how I have loved Your law! it is my meditation all the day.

**98.** You have made me wiser than my adversaries by Your commandments; for they are ever with me.

**99.** You have made me to know more than all my teachers; for Your testimonies are my meditation.

**100.** I excelled the aged in understanding; for I have kept Your statutes.

**101.** I have restrained my feet from every evil path, that I may keep Your word.

**102.** I have not declined from Your judgments; for You have taught me.

**103.** How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

**104.** By Your statutes I have acquired understanding; therefore I have hated every false way.

Not content with a simple affirmation, the prophet exclaims, by way of interrogation, that he was inflamed with incredible love to the law of God; and, in proof of this, he adds, that he was continually engaged in meditating upon it. **If any person boasts that he loves the Divine Law, and yet neglects the study of it, and applies his mind to other things, he betrays the grossest hypocrisy; for the love of the law, and especially such an ardent love of it as the prophet here expresses, always produces continual meditation upon it.**

And, assuredly, unless God’s law inflame and ravish our hearts with the love of it, many allurements will quickly steal upon us, and lead us away to vanity.

The prophet, then, here commends such a love of the law, as, possessing all our senses, effectually excludes all the deceits and corruptions to which we are otherwise too much inclined.

**98.** *You have made me wiser than my adversaries by Your commandments* He here declares, that he was more learned than his adversaries, his instructors, and the aged, because he was a scholar of God's law.

It is in a different sense that he describes himself as endued with understanding above his adversaries, from that in which he describes himself as wiser than his teachers. He surpassed his enemies, because their cunning and artifices availed them nothing when they employed these to the utmost to effect [bring about] his destruction. The malice of the wicked is always goading them to do mischief; and as they are often artful and deceitful, **we are afraid lest our simplicity should be imposed upon by their deceits, unless we use the same crafts and underhand dealings which they practice.** Accordingly, the prophet glories, that he found in God's law enough to enable him to escape all their snares.

When he claims the credit of being superior in knowledge to his instructors, he does not mean to deny that they also had learned from the word of God what was useful to be known. But he gives God thanks for enabling him to surpass, in proficiency, those from whom he had learned the first elements of knowledge. Nor is it any new thing for the scholar to excel his master, according as God distributes to each man the measure of understanding. The faithful, it is true, are instructed by the pains and labor of men, but it is in such a way, as that God is still to be regarded as enlightening them. And it is owing to this that the scholar surpasses the master; for God means to show as it were, with the finger, that He uses the service of men in such a way as that He himself continues still the chief teacher. Let us therefore learn to commit ourselves to His tuition [instruction], that we may glory with David, that by His guidance we have proceeded farther than man's instruction could lead us.

He adds the same thing respecting *the aged*, for the more abundant confirmation of his statement. Age is of great avail in polishing, by long experience and practice, men who, by nature, are dull and rude. Now the prophet asserts, that he had acquired, by the Divine Law, more discretion than belongs to aged men.

In short, he means to affirm, that whoever yields himself with docility to God, keeps his thoughts in subjection to His word, and exercises himself diligently in meditating upon the Law, will from there derive wisdom sufficient for enabling him to consult his own safety in opposition to the stratagems of his enemies, to exercise the prudence that is necessary to escape their deceits; and, finally, to match with the most eminent masters through the whole course of his life.

David . . . does not adduce his wisdom, that he may boast of it before the world; but, by his own example, he warns us, that **nothing is better for us than to learn at God's mouth, since those only are perfectly wise who are taught in His school.**

***Scripture alone is sufficient!***

At the same time, sobriety is here enjoined upon the faithful, that they may not seek for wisdom elsewhere than from God's word, and that ambition or curiosity may not incite

them to vain boasting. In short, **all are here recommended to behave themselves with modesty and humility**, that no man may claim to himself such knowledge as elevates him above the Divine Law; but **that all men, however intelligent, may willingly yield themselves to the lessons of heavenly wisdom revealed in the Divine Word.**

When he says, that *he kept God's statutes*, he teaches us what kind of meditation it is of which we have spoken, to let us know that he did not coldly philosophize upon God's precepts, but devoted himself to them with earnest affection.

**101.** *I have restrained my feet from every evil path.*

David commends his own constancy in observing the Law. He declares that ever since he had learned from God the right manner of living, he had pursued the right course. As the way is so slippery, and our feet so feeble, and our whole disposition so prone to go astray after innumerable errors, no small exertions are requisite on our part, in order to avoid declining from God's judgments.

But we must attend to the manner of teaching to which the Psalmist refers; for though all, without exception, to whom God's word is preached, are taught, yet scarcely one in ten so much as tastes it; yes, scarcely one in a hundred profits to the extent of being enabled, thereby, to proceed in a right course to the end. A peculiar manner of teaching is, therefore, here pointed out—that which consists in God's drawing His chosen people to Himself. I have been brought, as if the Psalmist had said, into the way of salvation, and preserved in it by the secret influence of the Holy Spirit.

### ***The sweetness of God's law***

**103.** *How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

He again repeats what he had previously stated in different words, that he was so powerfully attracted **by the sweetness of the Divine Law**, as to have no desire after any other delight. It is possible that a man may be affected with reverence towards the Law of God; but no one will cheerfully follow it, except he who has tasted this sweetness.

**God requires from us no slavish service; He will have us to come to Him cheerfully**, and this is the very reason why the prophet commends the sweetness of God's word so often in this psalm.

If it is demanded in what sense he declares that he took such sweet delight in God's Law, which, according to the testimony of Paul (1 Corinthians 3:9) does nothing else but strike fear into men, the solution is easy: The prophet does not speak of the dead letter which kills those who read it, but he comprehends the whole doctrine of the Law, the chief part of which is the free covenant of salvation. When Paul contrasts the Law with the Gospel, he speaks only of the commandments and threatening. Now if God were only to command, and to denounce the curse, the whole of His communication would, undoubtedly, be deadly.

But the prophet is not here opposing the Law to the Gospel; and, therefore, he could affirm that the grace of adoption, which is offered in the Law, was sweeter to him than honey; that is to say, that no delight was to him equal to this.

What I have previously said must be remembered, that the Law of God will be unsavory to us, or, at least, that it will never be so sweet to us, as to withdraw us from the pleasures of the flesh, until we have struggled manfully against our own nature, in order to subdue the carnal affections which prevail within us.

***Life is good? The good life is only found in obeying God's law.***

**104.** *By Your statutes I have acquired understanding; therefore I have hated every false way.*

The prophet seems here to invert the order he has just now laid down. He observed that he had kept his feet from going astray, that he might observe God's Law, and now he institutes a contrary order, beginning with the observance of the Law; for he declares that he had been taught by the word of God before he amended his faults. Yet these two things are not inconsistent—that the faithful should withdraw themselves from their wanderings, in order to frame their life according to the rule of God's word, and that when they are already advanced a considerable way in a holy life, the fear of God being then more vigorous in them, they should regard all vices with more intense hatred.

**The beginning of a good life, unquestionably, is when a man endeavors to purge himself from vices; and the more a man has made progress in a good life, he will burn with a proportionate zeal in his detestation of vices and in shunning them.**

Moreover, we are taught by the words of the prophet, that the reason why men are so involved in falsehoods, and entangled in perverse errors, is, because they have not learned wisdom from the word of God. As the whole world are given to folly, those who wander astray plead in excuse, that it is difficult for them to guard against the allurements of vice.

But the remedy will be near at hand, if we follow the counsel of the prophet; that is to say, if, instead of leaning on our own wisdom, we seek understanding from the word of God, in which He not only shows what is right, but also fortifies our minds, and puts us on our guard against all the deceits of Satan, and all the impostures of the world.

Would to God that, at the present day, this were thoroughly impressed on the minds of all who boast themselves of being Christians; for then they would not be continually driven about, as the greater part of them are, with such inconstancy, according to the conflicting impulses of prevailing opinions. As Satan is so sedulously exerting himself to spread abroad the mists of error, let us apply ourselves with the greater earnestness to the acquisition of this wisdom.

**166.** LORD I have waited for Your salvation and have done Your commandments.

**167.** My soul has kept Your testimonies, and I have loved them exceedingly.

. . . The chief virtue of the faithful, therefore, is a patient endurance of the cross and mortification by which they calmly submit themselves to God; for so long as no adversity happens to hypocrites, they seem, also to be well-affectioned to the work of serving Him. There are also other reasons why it behooves us to keep our minds intent upon the salvation of God, if we desire to regulate our life aright; for if the allurements of the world hold us in their snares, we will immediately become discouraged. The reason, as we

plainly see, why the hearts of the great majority fail, is because it is difficult to believe assuredly that salvation is to be hoped for only from the grace of God. That we may therefore persevere in serving God, it is indispensable that faith shine on the future before us, and next, that patience accompany us, to nourish within us the love of righteousness. For, as we have said, our alacrity in persevering proceeds from this, that with a patient spirit we suffer our salvation to lie hidden in the bosom of God, and that we doubt not of His at length, proving a faithful rewarder of all such as seek Him, although He may withdraw His favor from the eye of sense. In the subsequent verse the Psalmist confirms this doctrine by other words, saying, *that he kept God's testimonies with his soul*. By the word *soul* he expresses still more forcibly than before, that he had the doctrine of the law enclosed within the deepest recesses of his heart. The cause of this peculiarly diligent keeping of the law, was the singular love which he had to it, as he states in the concluding clause of the verse. . .

**168.** I have kept Your commandment and Your testimonies; for all my ways are before You.

. . . The truth, which he well knew, that nothing is hidden from God, served as a bridle to keep him devoted to the cultivation of godliness; for if we live not as under the omniscient inspection of God, the fickle lustfulness of the flesh quickly carries us away now one way and now another.

The meaning, also, may be this—that he made God the arbiter and judge of his life; for in Scripture language those are said *to walk before God*, who refer all their actions to Him, and, as it were, withdrawing themselves from the sight of men, present themselves at his judgment-seat. In this way he gives us to understand that he had endeavored not only to be free from all fault and blame before men, but also to offer to God a sound and sincere heart.

Whichever of these senses is adopted, he testifies that it is only when we consider that we have to deal with God, who searches the heart, and from whose eyes nothing is hidden, that we will observe His law aright.

This concluding clause may also be a form of protestation; as if the Prophet had said, Lord, You are the best witness of the fidelity with which I have kept Your law, for nothing is hidden from You. But he seems rather to have intended to say that the principle of his holy living, was his having consecrated his life to God, and having kept his thoughts fixed on the Divine presence.