

A PSALM ABOUT THE WORD

Psalm 119

The teachers of the older classes should look through all the notes from the Junior up to get a fuller background and be able to answer possible questions about the Psalms in general. The two major points in regard to Psalm 119—which are given in their simplest form in the Primary notes—are the center of the lesson.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms. Conjunction with the Lord and the heavens is by means of the Word.

Only knowledge of the Word can give us a true understanding and guide our lives aright.

Faith in the Lord is dependent upon knowledge of Him.

Good done from self is not charity.

Notes for Parents

Judah and Israel were overcome and carried away captive because they refused to obey the Lord in spite of all that He had done for them. They rejected or perverted the orderly worship in the temple and worshiped all manner of idols instead. In Christian countries like ours we have no temptation to make figures of wood or metal and worship them as gods, but many of us have our idols just the same. Anything we think of as more important for us than learning and doing the Lord's will is our idol. It may be money or success or pleasure. It may be husband or wife or children. It may be our own ideas. Or it may be simply physical ease and comfort. Think of all the excuses people have for not thinking about the Lord, not trying to obey Him, not reading the Word or going to church, and you are identifying their idols.

Our Psalm for today is in every verse a praise of the Word of the Lord. A psalm is a song of praise. The book of Psalms was the

hymn-book of the temple. It is also often called the book of David, because King David wrote many of the Psalms and directed the organizing of certain families of the Levites into trained singers and musicians to sing and accompany the Psalms in the services of the temple. David was himself a skillful player upon the harp or lyre, and was called “the sweet psalmist of Israel.” But David knew and declared that the words of the Psalms were not his own but were put into his mouth by inspiration from the Lord.

Psalm 119 points out to us very clearly and positively that it is from the Word of God alone that we get any understanding of God, of our own nature and relation to Him, and of the meaning and purpose of life. Without knowledge of the Word we stumble through life in darkness. Without obedience to the laws of the Lord as given us in the Word—which are the fundamental laws by which the whole universe is governed—we can have no lasting security, peace, or happiness.

Psalm 119 is an “alphabetical” Psalm. The Hebrew words which you find in some Bibles printed at the top of the sections are the names of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet in their order. In the original Hebrew each one of the eight verses of any given section begins with the letter which heads the section.

Primary

The children should know what a Psalm is, through whom many of the Psalms were written, and that they were used in the temple worship. The children should be helped to pick out the key words in each verse as the teacher reads the lesson from the Word.

From the very earliest times in the world people have liked to sing. It is usually when you are happy that you feel like singing, but sometimes, too, people express their sad feelings in song. Singing and playing on different kinds of instruments have always been ways in which people naturally expressed their gratitude to the Lord for all the wonderful things He gives us to keep us safe and happy.

Perhaps you remember that when Moses and the children of Israel were delivered by the Lord from their slavery in Egypt, after He had helped them to cross the Red Sea in such a wonderful way, Moses led them in a song of rejoicing and thanks. And then Miriam, the prophetess, who was the sister of Moses and Aaron, “took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. A timbrel is a musical instrument, one which continued to be a favorite with the Hebrew women all through the history of the Jews in the Old Testament.

In the Bible there is a whole book of songs. It is called “The Psalms.” Many of the Psalms were given us by the Lord through King David, who was himself an expert player upon the harp or lyre, and was also called “the sweet psalmist of Israel.”

The book of Psalms is a collection of the songs of worship which were sung in the temple.

There are altogether one hundred and fifty Psalms in the book.

The one we have for today is the longest of them.

There are two special things you should remember about this Psalm.

One is that it is an alphabetical Psalm.

That means that in the original Hebrew each of its twenty-two sections begins with a different letter of the alphabet, each verse in the section with the same letter.

The letters are in the correct order of the Hebrew alphabet.

The second thing is that every verse in the whole Psalm contains some word which refers to the Lord’s truth as we find it in the Bible.

This word may be *law*, or *statutes*, or *way*, or *testimony*, or *commandments*, or *judgments*, or some other similar word.

Let us read part of this Psalm and see if you can pick out such a word in each verse. [Read Psalm 119:9-16.]

Junior

A good many facts concerning the Psalms and their use by the ancient Hebrews have been given in the Junior notes, which should be of interest to the children. The alphabetical character of Psalm 119 should also interest them. But the principal thought to leave with them is that of the vital importance of the Word to our lives.

The Psalms are meant to be sung, and you know that we do at times sing them in church. We have an organ or piano for accompaniment. The ancient Hebrews, of course, did not have pianos. They **did have an instrument that was called an “organ,”** but it was not at all like ours. We know only that it was a wind instrument, probably made of several pipes fastened together. In the Bible the word *organ* is used to cover all the wind instruments. It is mentioned first in Genesis 4:21. The Jews also had other instruments which were used to accompany the Psalms. If you will look through the headings of the Psalms, you will often find in some Bibles the Hebrew name of the type of instrument which was to be used with the Psalm—*Neginoth* means stringed instruments, *Nehiloth* wind instruments like the flute. Some of the words in these headings refer to the particular tune to which the Psalm was sung. For example, the heading of Psalm 22 gives *Aijelath Shahar*, which means “the hind of the morning.” We learn from the book of Chronicles that four thousand men of the tribe of Levi were set apart to carry on the musical part of the worship. Three men, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan (or Juduthun) were the original leaders chosen in the time of David, and the same families continued to be brought up to be the singers and players. It was their life work. The women as well as the men took part. Read Psalm 68:25.

Many of the Psalms were certainly inspired through David, and the whole book is often called the book of David. King David, as you may perhaps remember, was a skillful player on the harp (lyre) and was also called “the sweet psalmist of Israel.” But read II Samuel 23:1-2, and see that David himself knew and declared that the words of his Psalms were from the Lord and not from his own mind.

The Psalm we have for our lesson for today is the longest one of all. You will see that it has twenty-two sections of eight verses each, and that above each section (KJV) a strange word is printed. These words are the names of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet in their order, and in the original Hebrew each of the eight verses of a section begins with the letter which heads the section.

So Psalm 119 is called an “alphabetical” Psalm. There are a few other Psalms of the alphabetical type, but none so clear and complete as this. The Jews felt that there was something holy about their alphabet, and there really was, for the Hebrew language was the one chosen by the Lord as best suited to His purpose in giving the Word of the Old Testament.

But there is another still more striking fact about Psalm 119. It is all about the Word: its origin, its power, and its effect upon our lives. If you read this Psalm attentively, you will find in every single verse some word or words which refer to the Lord’s Word in one or another of these aspects: law, testimony, way, precepts, statutes, commandments, judgments, word. Many of the verses of this Psalm are familiar to us. We should repeat them to ourselves often and we should read and reread the whole Psalm, because it is given to impress upon us the importance of recognizing that the Word is the voice of the Lord speaking to us, that no part of it can change or fail, that we cannot have any real understanding of the Lord, of ourselves, or of the meaning of life without studying it, and that we cannot have any lasting happiness without obeying it. We should never forget that all the misery in the world comes and always has come from failure to learn and live the truth as the Lord has given it to us in His Word.

Intermediate

The history of the ancient Hebrew nation should be rounded out for this class by telling them the reason for the return from exile. The teacher may then give as much of the history and position of the book of Psalms as he thinks will interest the class. But the major portion of the class period should be devoted to the nature and the lesson of Psalm 119.

Our lesson today is from the book of Psalms, which is often also called the book of David, who was called “the sweet psalmist of Israel.” The book of Psalms was the hymn-book of the temple and for this reason, probably, the Jews did not include it with the Law and the Prophets as part of their most sacred Scriptures. But David himself attributed his Psalms to inspiration from the Lord, and the

Lord later placed them with the Law and the Prophets as part of the Word. Read II Samuel 23:1-2 and Luke 24:44.

Psalm 119, the longest of the Psalms, is an “alphabetical” Psalm. You will see in your Bible that it is divided into twenty-two sections of eight verses each, and that there is a strange word at the head of each section (KJV). These words are the names of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet in their proper order, and in the original Hebrew each verse in a given section begins with the letter which heads that section. Swedenborg tells us that every letter of the Hebrew alphabet “signifies a thing in the spiritual world” and that “therefore David wrote the 119th Psalm, in order, according to the letters of the alphabet.” The same thing is done in Psalm 111, but not so evidently, and there are five other Psalms which at least partially carry out this principle.

But there is another characteristic of Psalm 119 which makes it a particularly important one for us to study. It is throughout a Psalm about the Word—its origin, its power, and the place it ought to have in our lives. Every one of its hundred and seventy-six verses contains some word or words expressive of divine truth as it is given us in the Word of God: *law, testimonies, ways, precepts, commandments, judgments, statutes, word, faithfulness, ordinances, name*. Many of the verses of this Psalm are very familiar to us. We sometimes sing or read selections from it in church. And we should read and study it and give it a chance to make its deep impression upon us.

For the Word, as we know, is not only our instructor in all things concerning the Lord and our souls, but it is our only means of coming into contact with the Lord. All knowledge of the Divine which exists in the world anywhere has come originally from our Word or from the Ancient Word which preceded it. We cannot find out about God for ourselves. He has to reveal Himself to us, and He does so not independently to each one’s heart, as some people like to think, but always through the verses of the Word which we have taken into our minds. Remember the covenant of the rainbow in the story of Noah. It is the raindrops of truth from the Word in

our memories which reflect the pure white light of truth from God and bring it back to us in beautiful varied colors according to our states and needs.

Our Psalm tells us, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path”: the Word enlightens our minds and shows us the right way of life. It tells us, “Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me”: it shows us how to recognize and fight our temptations. It tells us, “For ever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven”: the Word is the expression of the fundamental order of heaven; it does not change with earthly times. It tells us, “Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them” (the original meaning of *offend* is to cause to stumble, as in RSV): obedience to the Word enables us to live in inner peace and to be undisturbed by any of the adversities which come to us. Every verse of the Psalm gives us something important to think about, which helps us to come into the state of mind and endeavor expressed in verses 33 and 34: “Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart.”

Basic Correspondences

lamp	=	divine truth
judgment	=	of truth
justice	=	of good
the undefiled (perfect)	=	one who speaks and does truth from charity

Senior

The vital importance of reading the Word regularly and guiding our thinking as well as our conduct according to its precepts is the important lesson for the Seniors. The skepticism and materialism which they will meet in the world needs this sane approach to life to balance it.

In Luke 24:44-45 we read that the Lord after His resurrection, in talking to the assembled Apostles, said: “These are the words

which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures.” This places the book of Psalms on an equal basis with the Law and the Prophets as part of the Old Testament Scriptures. David himself, to whom many of the Psalms are attributed—so that it is often called the book of David—declared that he received them by inspiration (II Samuel 23: 1-2). The Jews class the book of Psalms among the “Writings” which they do not hold to be equal in inspiration with the Law and the Prophets. This is probably because the Psalms were the hymn-book of the temple and were not kept with the Law and the Prophets.

The 119th Psalm is one of seven “alphabetical” Psalms in the book, the others being 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and 145. The form is carried out more obviously and completely in Psalm 119 than in any of the others, and is an interesting study in itself. The Hebrew words printed above the sections of the Psalm (KJV) are the names of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet in their proper order, and in the original Hebrew each of the eight verses in any given section begins with the letter which heads the section. This very old device of alphabetical form has a sound foundation, as you will see from the quotation from the *Apocalypse Revealed* at the end of this lesson.

But the spiritual meaning of the letters of the alphabet is beyond our present reach, and we are more immediately concerned with another phase of the Psalm. If you will read it carefully, you will find in every verse some word or words which refer to the Word of the Lord as the law or way of life. You will also find that many of its sections and many of its verses are very familiar to you. This is partly because in the New Church we sometimes sing or read selections from this Psalm, and partly because in it the Word is presented to us in such a variety of brief striking statements that its verses are often memorized and widely quoted. We find in it verses which adequately express our praise of the Lord, our consciousness of

our own weakness and failures, our desire to be guided by the Lord, and our sense of rest and peace on coming into the order of the Word. It is a Psalm to which we can go with assurance when we are looking for a strong statement from the Word to help us in meeting some particular temptation. With this in mind read the first section of the Psalm and see how it sets forth the importance of the Word to our well-being and happiness, our constant need of it, and the happy result of learning and keeping its precepts.

In our modern world, into which you are going shortly to make your own way, you will find many who know almost nothing about the Bible and who have no sense of loss from their ignorance. They may seem successful and happy, but a longer acquaintance with them will reveal that their happiness is entirely dependent upon external conditions. Loss of dear ones, loss of money or position, illness, any untoward event may in a moment destroy their security and peace. Often they have no inner steadiness or vision.

This is because strength and peace come from the Lord alone, and our contact with the Lord is in the Word. The Lord is the Word in its inmost. Unless we know the Lord and our relation to Him, our lives are necessarily limited to the material plane, whose pleasures, while very real, are uncertain and fleeting. If we do read the Word and come to know the nature of God, His order, and the meaning and purpose of life, we can enjoy the pleasures of the natural world even more keenly because of our gratitude to Him for them, and we can accept our bereavements and adversities with equal serenity as opportunities to learn and to grow spiritually.

In the ninth verse of our Psalm we read: "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word," and in the ninety-eighth verse: "Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me." These are verses which every young person just starting out in the world should memorize and repeat to himself often, and there are many others in the Psalm which should be stored away in our memory for the Lord to call forth for us in

time of need. Every one of us should so live and learn from the Word that we can say from experience: “Through thy precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.”

Adult

The reason why the Psalms should be sung in church is important for this class, as well as the facts noted concerning the New Church canon of Scripture. The two main points concerning the letter of Psalm 119 should be stated, and then the Psalm may be discussed in more detail than with the other classes, drawing on the knowledge of it which the members of the class have. Favorite verses will perhaps be suggested and compared.

Psalm 119, the longest of the Psalms, is one of the most interesting in the letter. In the first place it is the most completely worked out of the seven “alphabetical” Psalms, the other six being numbers 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and 145. None of them, of course, is alphabetical in the translation, but Psalm 119 is printed in KJV Bibles with the names of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in their order at the head of the sections, and we should know that in the original Hebrew every one of the eight verses in any given section begins with the letter which heads the section.

Another interesting fact—which is evident in the translation—is that each verse of the Psalm contains some word or words referring to the law of the Lord: *statutes, commandments, way*, etc. This makes it clear that the whole Psalm treats of the Word and its importance in our lives.

In Revelation 1:11 the Lord says to John at the beginning of his vision: “I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last.” We know that Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. It is in connection with the explanation of this verse that Swedenborg tells us in AR 38: “Since every letter signifies a thing in the spiritual world, and thence in the angelic language; therefore David wrote the 119th Psalm, in order, according to the letters of the alphabet.” When we stop to think that the letters of our own alphabet are the symbols by means of which all our thoughts and feelings are expressed, communicated to others, and preserved for

posterity, we can better understand why “every letter signifies a thing in the spiritual world,” and how a Psalm composed in the complete alphabetical form is intended to impress upon us the whole range of its subject.

The Psalms are meant to be sung, and we know that music is the expression of the affections. We should remember this whenever we sing the selections in church. Sometimes people complain of the difficulty of singing the selections, and because of this some of our churches have even been reduced to the practice of reading instead of singing them, and often the singing of them is left to the choir. But this is a serious loss to all in the church. The Psalms cannot be sung to ordinary “tunes” without distorting the words of Scripture, and we should all be willing to make the effort to learn the few simple rules which govern the necessary chanting, and to practice until we can follow the chants easily. When we read the Psalms, they make a deep impression on our minds—as any part of the Word does—but when we sing them, our hearts are engaged. In the temple worship the Psalms were sung by families of the Levites set apart and trained from childhood for that particular service, and they were sung to the accompaniment of various instruments, both wind and strings. The women of the families also took part.

We are all familiar with many of the verses of Psalm 119. The opening section is a recognition of the fact that happiness can come only as we learn and obey the law of the Lord, and a prayer to be enabled to obey it. The next section begins with the often-quoted verse, “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word,” and suggests various ways in which this instruction may be carried out. Then follow sections which acknowledge our own weakness and need of the Lord’s guidance and help. The temptations through which we must pass and our gratitude for strength received from the Word are followed by recognition of its supreme and impregnable position and expressions of our love for it, including verses which express our grief that everyone does not learn and keep the law and that

our sincere efforts to convert them often fail. Perhaps the best-known sections are verses 97 to 112. From this point on the Psalm increases in intensity and devotion, and near the end is the beautiful verse (165): “Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them.” *Offend* is here used in its original meaning of “turn aside” or “cause to stumble.” But it is significant that after all this rejoicing in the knowledge and keeping of the law, the Psalm ends on a thoroughly humble note: “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments.” So we find in this Psalm a complete pattern of life in which we are governed from childhood to old age by dependence upon the Lord as we find Him revealed in His Word.

The Lord Himself placed the book of Psalms with the Law and the Prophets as fully inspired Scripture (Luke 24:44), contrary to the tradition of the ancient Hebrews, who considered it as belonging among the “Writings,” not of equal inspiration with the Law and the Prophets. The book of Psalms and the book of Daniel were excluded from the Jewish canon of Scripture, the former probably because it was in common use as a hymn-book, and the latter because they felt no prophet would be inspired outside the Holy Land. Ezekiel, it is true, prophesied in captivity, but he had been a priest and perhaps a prophet before he was taken captive, and also he recorded more than once that he was carried in the spirit to Jerusalem for his visions. For the same reason Judaism separated the Lamentations of Jeremiah, which were written in Egypt, from the body of his book and placed them also among the “Writings.” The Lord refers to Daniel as a prophet in Matthew 24:15. The New Church canon of Old Testament Scripture is the Hebrew canon plus the Psalms, Daniel, and Lamentations.

The Lord said that the Psalms treated of Him. Psalm 119 has its internal senses throughout, and in *Prophets and Psalms* Swedenborg gives us the following very brief summary of its celestial sense: “The Lord fulfilled the Law, or the Word, from its firsts to its lasts, and therefore He was hated, and suffered temptations, and thus made the Human one with His Divine.”

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Revealed, n. 38: “Since every letter signifies a thing in the spiritual world, and thence in the angelic language; therefore David wrote the 119th Psalm, in order, according to the letters of the alphabet, beginning with Aleph and ending with Thau, as may appear from the initials of the verses there; the like appears in Psalm 111, but not so evidently. Therefore, also Abram was called Abraham, and Sarai was called Sarah; which was done for the reason that in heaven by Abraham and Sarah, they should not be understood, but the Divine, as is also the case; for the letter ‘H’ involves infinity, because it is only an aspirate.”

True Christian Religion, n. 234: “There is conjunction with the Lord by means of the Word because He is the Word, that is, the essential Divine truth and good therein. This conjunction is effected by means of the sense of the letter, because the Word in that sense is in its fulness, in its holiness, and in its power . . . This conjunction is not apparent to man, but it exists in affection for truth and in the perception of truth. There is affiliation with the angels of heaven by means of the sense of the letter, because within that sense there is a spiritual and a celestial sense; and the angels are in these senses, the angels of the Lord’s spiritual kingdom in the spiritual sense of the Word, and the angels of His celestial kingdom in the celestial sense. These two senses are evolved from the natural sense of the Word when it is read by a man who regards the Word as holy. The evolution is instantaneous; consequently the affiliation is also.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. What is a psalm? *a song*
- P. How did the Jews use the book of Psalms? *hymnal*
- P. Through whom were many of the Psalms written? *David*
- J. What did David say about the Psalms? *inspired by God*
- I. What did the Lord say about them? *prophesied about Him*
- P. Which one is the longest of the Psalms? *119th*
- J. What is peculiar about its structure? *“alphabetical”*
- J. What is its general subject? *the Word*
- J. How is this subject impressed upon us? *in every verse*
- I. Why should we study the Word? *to learn how to live*
- J. Why should we obey its precepts? *to find eternal happiness*
- S. Why are some of the Psalms written in alphabetical order? *to show they contain a complete summary of a subject*
- S. Where in the Word does its power rest? *letter or literal sense*