

DISCOVERING
DELIGHT

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31 Meditations on Loving God's Law

Glenda Mathes



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PREFACE

And I will delight myself in thy commandments, which I have loved.

—PSALM 119:47

The concept of loving law clashes in modern ears like crashing cymbals. Today's Christians don't want to read about law. They want to revel in gospel and grace. But the Bible clearly links law with love. If you question this, read Psalm 119, a long psalm that often gets short shrift.

As the longest chapter of the Bible, it seems too much to memorize or read during devotions. Because it so often mentions God's law, we may think of it as legalistic, boring, or repetitive. This intricately constructed acrostic poem, however, radiates joy for God's Word and generates delight in His timeless promises. Hebrew readers studying it in its original language may notice poetical devices that are lost to readers of English versions, but love for God's Word shines through in any language.

While at least one of eight Hebrew words for God's law appears in nearly every one of the psalm's 176 verses, forms of "I" and "you" appear even more frequently. That's because Psalm 119 is more than a carefully crafted poem praising God's Word. It is the passionate prayer of an individual in authentic communion with God. The psalmist is a person

very much like you and me—he struggles with sin and suffering, cries for divine help, and rejoices in the God who hears and answers prayer.

Psalms 119's praise of God and His Word is not isolated. Other psalms, Old Testament passages, and New Testament texts specifically extol God's law and encourage believers to love the written as well as the living Word.

Before examining each of Psalm 119's twenty-two sections, *Discovering Delight: 31 Meditations on Loving God's Law* reflects on five law-exalting poems that appear earlier in the Psalter (1, 19, 37, 40, 112). Then, *Discovering Delight* explores two passages from the prophets (Isaiah 58, Jeremiah 15) and two New Testament texts (Romans 7, Revelation 19) that express sensory delight in the Word of God.

I want to express my appreciation to Dr. Peter J. Wallace, whose online sermons on Psalm 119 (www.peterwallace.org/sermons.htm) I discovered when this manuscript was nearly complete. His explanations—especially of Hebrew words and their placement in the text—expanded my understanding and confirmed much of what I had written. His sermons affirmed my view of the psalm's beauty as well as its practicality. I also wish to express my sincere appreciation to Rev. Mark Vander Hart, associate professor of Old Testament studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, whose early explanations regarding the Hebrew alphabet and the character of God's covenant love guided my reflections.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible. Occasional quotations appear from the Heidelberg Catechism, which is a highly personal set of questions and answers exploring the biblical comfort of belonging to Christ. This catechism, the Belgic

Confession (also mentioned in these meditations), and the Canons of Dort were written in the early years following the Protestant Reformation to help people understand scriptural truth and unite the fledgling Protestant churches on the European Continent. These documents are known as the Three Forms of Unity and are embraced by Reformed churches. The Westminster Shorter Catechism—also mentioned in these meditations—is a simplified version of the Westminster Larger Catechism, both of which originated with the Westminster Confession during seventeenth-century English Puritanism. The Westminster Standards are utilized by Presbyterian churches.

The subject of loving God's law attracted me because I needed to know what the Bible says about delight. It is a lesson I still study. As with so many things, the more I learn, the more I see how much I have yet to learn.

May God's Spirit fill your heart with joy and peace as you read these meditations. May they whet your appetite for feasting on God's written and living Word!

—Glenda Mathes

FRUITFUL TREE

1

Scripture Reading: Psalm 1

But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

—PSALM 1:2

The first song in the Psalter puts readers into meditation mode, comparing the believer to a fruitful tree and stressing how the blessed person delights in the Lord's law. The psalm's first verse describes the man (or woman) who is blessed by expressing the negatives of three actions. He or she does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, does not stand in the way of sinners, and does not sit in the seat of the scornful. Walking, standing, and sitting represent three different levels of action. Walking is the most active physically, but sitting could very well be the most active mentally.

The blessed person doesn't take part in ungodly activities or implement ungodly counsel. While Christians may develop relationships with unbelievers, especially for the purpose of evangelism, they don't stand with them in sinful or fruitless pursuits. And they don't sit in on plans with people who scorn God's name and Word.

Blessing comes to the person who makes conscious and committed efforts to avoid ill-advised actions, sinful philosophies, and scornful attitudes. But blessing derives from more than merely avoiding bad behaviors. Verse 2 tells us that actively meditating on God's law brings blessing and delight. The godly person loves God's Word so much that he or she meditates on it day and night.

Reading Scripture early in the morning as the first fruits of your day is a good start. Meditating on God's Word again in the evening is even better. But this verse encompasses much more than a command for daily and nightly personal devotions. It's about loving God's law so intensely that you long to spend time reveling in it. Your mind and heart become so steeped in Scripture that portions of the Word saturate your thoughts and accompany your daily activities. Meditating day and night is an attitude as well as an action.

In lovely imagery, Psalm 1:3 describes the blessed person as a firmly rooted, fruitful tree with unwithered leaves. Its roots reach toward life-giving rivers, drinking deeply of living waters. At the proper time it brings forth sound fruit. It is full of lustrous green leaves, free from pest or blight. The image of a tree budding in the spring, bursting with full foliage in the summer, and bearing ripe fruit in the fall effectively pictures the believer performing righteous deeds through the progression of time and the process of personal sanctification.

The believer-as-tree simile occurs repeatedly in Scripture. Jeremiah 17:8 echoes Psalm 1:3 in remarkably similar words: "For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not

be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit” (Jer. 17:8). Despite heat and drought, this believer tree will produce fruit and enjoy peace. Christians who drink deeply of God’s living waters will bear the fruit of righteousness and experience peace that passes understanding, even during times of scorching physical adversity or arid spiritual drought.

Ezekiel uses similar language when describing the trees he sees in a vision:

And by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary: and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine. (Ezek. 47:12)

These trees drink of water that issues from God’s holy sanctuary. Although their fruit will be used for food, it will not disappear; the leaf will not fade despite being used for healing. Doesn’t this imagery remind you of the Tree of Life in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9) and still more of the final Tree of Life from which believers will eat in the superior paradise (Rev. 2:7)? Just as the leaves of the tree in Ezekiel’s vision would become medicine, the leaves of the definitive Tree of Life will be for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2).

To say that the blessed person prospers in all things doesn’t mean that every believer will experience business success, enjoy physical health, and live within a happy family. God may allow a Christian to struggle for decades under financial adversity, to suffer for much of life from chronic pain and fatigue, or to grieve for years the heartache of a

wayward child. Believers sometimes experience worldly prosperity, but often they do not. True prosperity is not found in the things of this world, but in the things of the eternal realm. All that is done for Christ counts as success in His kingdom. And believers prosper eternally because their future is secure in Christ.

This isn't true for the wicked. The future of the ungodly is far from secure. Verse 4 shows that in contrast to the sturdy believer tree, firmly rooted beside refreshing streams, unbelievers are like bits of grain husks blown into oblivion by the blustery wind.

The ungodly will not be able to stand before the judgment seat of Christ or in the great and final gathering of the righteous (v. 5). They will crumple under the scrutiny of God's final judgment. And those who persist in sin will have no place in the ultimate and unified congregation of the church triumphant.

The way of the wicked will perish, but God knows the way of the righteous (v. 6). He sees your struggle right now. He knows what will happen to you today, this week, this month, and every year for the rest of your life. He will watch over your every step in this temporal life and in all aspects of your eternal future. Because of Christ's finished work, believers will stand without faltering before His judgment. They will join the righteous throng that enters the city gates and partakes of the tree of life (Rev. 22:14).

As you begin this devotional of meditating on God's Word, may His Spirit fill your heart with joy in your Lord and love for His delightful law.

Questions for Reflection

How might I be walking, standing, or sitting in ways that compromise my Christian faith?

What is my attitude about God's Word and meditating on it?

What specific steps can I take to become more like a believer tree?

Scripture Reading: Psalm 19

*The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament
sheweth his handywork.*

—PSALM 19:1

Since psalms are Hebrew poetry, we need to read them differently from the historical portions of Scripture. Rather than viewing them as subsequent chapters in a narrative, we must see the book of Psalms as a series of poetical reflections. A poem often moves suddenly from one topic to another, and few psalms contain shifts that seem more abrupt than Psalm 19. The first six verses speak in vivid imagery about God's world, but verse 7 switches into a lovely ode extolling God's Word. Is this shift as illogical as it might initially appear?

Not when we consider that God reveals Himself in two ways: general revelation and special revelation—His world and His Word. Article 2 of the Belgic Confession beautifully expresses biblical truth regarding the two ways God reveals Himself:

We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before

our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see *clearly the invisible things of God*, even *his everlasting power and divinity*, as the apostle Paul says (Romans 1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.

This quote from the Belgic Confession helps us see how Psalm 19, despite the apparent sudden shift in content, is one unified whole extolling God's general as well as His special revelation. The Confession's comparison of the created cosmos to "a most elegant book" strengthens our understanding of Psalm 19's unity. The open tome of creation leads us to seek further understanding by opening the Word of God. The Confession's language delightfully reflects the literary tone of Psalm 19's first six verses.

God created the sun, moon, and stars. We know from Genesis 1:14 that He set them in the heavens as signs. Day after day and night after night, they clearly testify to God's creative power and continual order. Psalm 19 confirms that the witness of the heavenly bodies spans the whole earth and can be understood in any language.

God's general revelation transcends the confusion brought about at the Tower of Babel. God's works declare His glory in neon lights that no one can ignore. The gospel of a good and intelligent Creator who delights in orderly variety and inspiring beauty is nightly written in bright points of light punctuating the dark heavens and daily inscribed in warm beams of sunshine radiating from a blue sky.

Psalm 19 uses the literary device of simile to depict the sun as a resplendent bridegroom eagerly leaving his chamber. Can't you imagine a beaming young Israelite man, clothed in richly decorated garments, parting the canvas hangings of a tent to go forward to meet his betrothed? Scripture frequently portrays the relationship of Christ to His church like that of a groom to his bride. God initiated His covenant relationship with the church. Christ is the head of the church now and will come for His bride one day. Perhaps that's why in traditional Christian ceremonies, the first member of the wedding party to enter is the groom.

With another simile, Psalm 19 compares the sun in its circuit to a strong man joyfully running a race. Moms attending track meets or dads watching sports shows have seen an exultant runner crossing the finish line. Anyone can envision how a runner throws every part of his being into that final push and thrusts his arms high in ecstatic elation as he breaks the red ribbon. These literary images give us a glimpse of how the sun crowns God's magnificent creation and how it reflects His authority, beauty, strength, and joy.

Creation also shows us God's omnipresence and omniscience. Verse 6 tells us that the sun goes from one end of the heaven to the other and nothing is hid from its heat. How much more is the world exposed under God's eye! He is everywhere present—He sees and knows all things. Though the sun appears to move in a circuit around the earth, we know that the earth actually orbits the sun. Isn't this a bit like the way we tend to think of God? I am often so self-centered that, without even realizing it, I think of myself as the center of the universe, as if God and all His benefits revolve around me. In reality I am only a small

speck in space, a tiny creature in a vast cosmos whose entire existence revolves around its Creator God.

Following the lovely imagery about celestial bodies that act as a most elegant book and declare the glory of God, Psalm 19 shifts into a paean praising God's law. As we noted earlier, this change seems less sudden if we see the psalmist moving from praising God's general revelation to extolling His special revelation.

The union may be even more organic than we think. Although we need God's written Word to know and understand His salvation plan, the heavens direct our thoughts and praise to God, which leads us to seek His will from His Word.

Verses 7 through 9 of Psalm 19 describe God's law in eloquent language:

The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

Notice all the descriptors? The law of the Lord is perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, and righteous. It is the ultimate ideal. Note also the many present participles, "ing" verbs, in this section. What is the law doing? It is converting the soul, making wise the simple, rejoicing the heart, enlightening the eyes, and enduring forever. Such action verb phrases vibrantly depict God's law as living and active (see also Heb. 4:12).

After the psalmist makes God's Word come alive, he exalts its value as better treasure than much fine gold. It

surpasses a sunken chest filled with gold doubloons. It outshines the British crown jewels. It exceeds Bill Gates's bank account. Who wouldn't want such remarkable wealth?

God's Word is more than valuable; it is sweet, sweeter than golden honey, fresh from the comb, dripping off a warm homemade biscuit. We should crave God's mouth-watering words and delight in them more than the most delicious food.

From verse 11, we learn that Scripture warns and rewards us. It alerts us to ways we tend to sin. It also shows that keeping God's commandments leads to a sense of peace and a feeling of joy. As we obey, we increasingly delight in doing God's will.

As the psalmist turns to personal petitions, he acknowledges that we all overlook our own sins. He asks God to cleanse him from "secret faults" (v. 12), which could include the sins he hides from others as well as the sins he himself fails to see. He pleads with God to keep him from "presumptuous sins" so that they don't gain "dominion" in his life (v. 13). These presumptuous sins could be willful sins—when we really know that what we're doing is not right, but we do it anyway. They could also be the presumption that God will forgive us or that we're not so bad. Such a sin might be assuming we're saved, but producing hypocritical or legalistic fruit that rots from the inside out. These attitudes lead to sinful behaviors that gain mastery over us. In contrast, the humble heart produces righteous fruit. Even though we're all sinners, God sees believers as upright and innocent because of Christ's atonement.

The final verse of Psalm 19 is a personal favorite that is frequently in my mind: "Let the words of my mouth, and

the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer” (v. 14). Here is a prayer that is appropriate before every church function, family reunion, or friendly get-together. It is just as important to pray before meeting a friend for coffee as prior to confronting someone about a sin. It is a wonderful prayer while you are driving somewhere and mulling over what you’ll say when you get there. But it is also great as what I call a “Nehemiah prayer”: the kind of quick, split-second prayer for guidance that Nehemiah cast up to the Lord before answering King Artaxerxes’s question (Neh. 2:4). This is a prayer for God to guide everything I think, do, and say and to look on all my thoughts, actions, and words with His favor. Would God be pleased with the words that easily slip from my lips, the thoughts on which I relentlessly dwell, and the desires I cherish in my heart? This is a prayer worth engraving in the brain.

May this be your prayer wherever you are today and wherever the Lord leads you far into the future. May you view every part of God’s creation as His most elegant book and daily immerse yourself in His written book. When we read the Bible, we increase our ability to recognize our sins, even the pride and other pet sins so stubbornly ingrained and deeply hidden in our hearts, and we desire more to live for God while increasingly delighting in His world and His Word.

Questions for Reflection

How does considering creation as a most elegant book expand my concept of God's character?

If I look deeply at my own heart, what stubborn sins do I hide from others and even from myself?

In what specific ways can I demonstrate to God and others my mastery over presumptuous sins?