

## Thursday Morning Bible Study:

### Unexpected Psalms: Do We Ever Sing Like That?

Hymns:

376 This Is The Law Of You, Dear Lord

237 You Have Blessed Me With So Much, My God

### 5. Psalms in Praise of God's Law

Two Psalms – 19 and 119 – are focused on the glory, joy and wonder of God's Law. Other psalms, especially Psalm 25, take up in parts this theme. They really flow out of Psalm 1, that simple meditation at the start of the psalter on the blessedness of life grounded in the meditation on and delight in the law of the Lord.

The longest of all the Psalms, Psalm 119, is a rhapsodic paean of joy to the law of God. Over 22 stanzas, each stanza composed of 8 lines of poetry, and each line in the stanza beginning with the same letter (so that by the end of the psalm you have a carefully constructed acrostic poem), the songwriter is giving us words to exult and rejoice in the goodness of God's law.

It is as though he has meditated on Psalms 1 and 19:7-14, and expanded those verses into the this most glorious expression of delight and wonder. It is a love song. It is for the obedient and the law what the Song of Songs is for a woman and a man. Vv. 47-48: '...I find my delight in your commandments, which I love. I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes.' V. 72 'The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.' V. 103 'How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!' V. 20 'My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times.' V. 62 'At midnight I rise to praise you because of your righteous rules.'

It is full of resolve (see last week's study.) In the face of opposition, slander, deceptive voices, the seeming triumph of the wicked, and in situations of sorrow and despondancy, there is the determination to hold fast to the law of God. V. 57 'The LORD is my portion; I promise to keep your words.' V. 51 'The insolent utterly deride me, but I do not turn away from law.' V. 61 'Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me, I do not forget your law.' V. 29 'Put false ways far from me and graciously teach me your law!' V. 101 'I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word.' V. 106 'I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to keep your righteous rules.' And vv. 33-40 – a whole stanza of resolution, calling on God's help:

'Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end.  
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law, and observe it with my whole heart.

Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.

Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!

Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways.

Confirm to your servant your promise, that you may be feared.

Turn away the reproach that I dread, for your rules are good.

Behold, I long for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life!'

The gift of the law is the greatest blessedness that the singer of this song knows – it is to have the face of God shine on him or her (v. 135), it is the way of blessedness (vv.

1-2), it is safety from sinning (v. 11); the bountiful dealings of God are to enable us to live and keep His word; it gives us a wide place in which to walk – it is not constricting and limiting (v. 45); in an earth full of the steadfast love of the LORD, nothing is more desirable than knowing His statutes (v. 64.)

And so we could go on! Let's think about this love song and reflect on why perhaps we don't sing songs like this.

Our language is really shaped by what matters to us. These things become topics of a rich and varied vocabulary. It's said that the languages of the Inuit-Aleut people of far northern Canada have more than 50 words and phrases for snow. Snow matters to people who have to make their lives in a region where winters are long and hard. And this psalm is rich in words that deal with law and obedience. Here are synonyms for 'law' that are found in the psalm: ways, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, righteous rules, word, law, decrees (faithfulnesses), wondrous works, promise... My guess is that some would hear that list of words and think something like 'How dreary, how *unattractive*.' We might think why go on and on about *that*. And we might think that all these words run into one, that they are all saying much the same thing. But each of those words has a sharp particularity, a focus on some definite aspect. Geoff Bingham gives some insight into these words, and comments, 'If we consider these synonyms we see they dovetail together and make a body of truth that is directive, hortatory, explanatory, enlightening, revelatory and which declares the will of God for [humanity.]'<sup>1</sup>

I think that it is true to say of Psalm 119 that the basic assumption about humanity, the basic category by which our humanity is defined, is that of obedience. A true human being is one who knows and loves God and longs to obey all that He commands, to walk in His ways, and to live in conformity to His true being (which is the source of our being, as those made in the image of God.) I remember Geoff Bingham saying about our relationship to God, 'God is Creator, we are creatures; God is Lord, we are servants; God is Father, we are children.'<sup>2</sup> Each of those correlatives – creature, servant, child – is essentially one of subordination and obedience; joyfully and lovingly so, but obedience all the same.

So – is the basic assumption of current Christianity, and its expression in current hymnody, that we are essentially made for obedience? I think that we would tend to pick up from our hymnody (and from our preaching) that our basic category is 'to be loved.' There is an element of truth in this, but there are dangers. This is a passive category, not an active one. It leaves us waiting for something to happen to us, some experience of being loved, out of which we hope to find the motivation to love God. And then our acts of love are divorced from the category of obedience and are thought of primarily in the category of 'authenticity.' But I think that thinking doesn't quite match the framework that the New Testament develops.

Certainly the New Testament bears testimony to the love of God!!! The sending of Jesus Christ is because of the great love with which God loved the world (John 3:16.) The apostle John tells us that God is love (and light.) But he recognises that we are at risk of putting on that word 'love' all our misconceptions and deceptions. So, he tells us exactly how we know what love is: 'In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live

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<sup>1</sup> See Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Law of Eternal Delight*, 2001, New Creation Publications: Blackwood, pp. 42-47 for a discussion on Psalm 119. The quote is from page 45.

<sup>2</sup> I can't reference this.

through him. This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.’ (1John 4:9-10.) ‘God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’ (Rom. 5:8), Because of this, God’s people, those who believe in Christ, can be sure that there is nothing at all anywhere – no power, no experience – that can separate us from that love (Rom. 8:31-29.)

So, the basic presupposition about our lives as God’s people is that we are loved. We are not meant to be waiting for some ‘experience’ of ‘being loved.’ God *has* loved us with a love that carries and supports through all things. How do I know God loves me? Because I believe that Christ has died for my sins, has been raised to set me right with God, and now sits at the Father’s right hand as an eternal vouchsafing that God’s love will never end. What the New Testament focuses on in the question of God’s love is *what it now means for us*. Geoff Bingham quotes Karl Barth:

‘And with [Christ] we now live another life, a new life. In Him God’s Law stands *before* us and powerfully *over* us in its pure and true form: a single irresistible offer and command of God’s grace to us who have been put to death with him and now live in him... ‘to be in Christ’ simply means to be bound by the pure and true Law of God established and made effective in him.’<sup>3</sup>

As John puts it in his epistle, ‘Beloved, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.’ (1John 4:11-12)

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is thoroughly, perfectly moral – it doesn’t *sentimentalise* us, it *moralises* us, in that it makes us obedient to God from the heart (Rom. 6:17.) (Morality here is not just *ethical* but *obedient*. To be ethical currently seems to mean to be congruent with whatever moral code you adopt; but to be obedient is to submit to the way of life, the code of true human conduct given by God.) And to be obedient means to listen to the word of God, and to do it. This obedience is of course, clearly in every part of God’s word, not the grounds for our being right with God, but rather the outcome of His saving, redeeming, justifying grace worked in His Son.

To love God, in response to His saving love for us, is to love His word, His way, His truth, His commands. And maybe if we rediscover that deeply moral element to the truth of love, we will find ourselves able to rhapsodize about the law of God, which is summarised in those two commands – ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength; and you shall love your neighbour as yourselves.’

Love you, Lord; love you, Lord; love you Lord; love you Lord.  
Love you, Lord; love you now, Lord, forever;  
Love you, Lord; love your word; love your sweet, precious blood;  
Love you, Lord, in our hearts and forever.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Shorter Commentary on Romans*, p. 90; quoted in Bingham, *The Law of Eternal Delight*, p. 145, *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Love You Lord*, 1989, #176, *New Creation Hymn Book*, New Creation Publications: Blackwood, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2010