

The Bible. What Is It? Why Bother With It?

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[0 : 0 0] As I said this morning, I'd like us to turn to Psalm 119 and to look at this great Psalm together. We'll read again at verse 105. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm, it's the longest Psalm by a mile, in fact it's the longest chapter in the Bible. And this great song that stretches out over many, many verses is focusing on reading, knowing and loving God's word. And I want us to think about that today, to think about God's word and for us that's the whole Bible and to think more about the place that it has in our lives. And I think it's a good time of year to do that because it's summer for many of us, it's a chance to slow down, to be refreshed and to refocus and reorient our lives. I'm sure that for all of us life would have been busy coming up to the holidays and it's nice to get the chance to take a breath to slow down. And after the holidays I doubt that there's many people thinking well I can't wait till life gets back to total chaotic mess again. We don't want that, we want to think, you know when I go back, when we go back to normal routine we want to have things in a better order, we want to have things more balanced. And part of that balance is the place that we give to the Bible in our lives and as we consider that Psalm 119 is an immensely helpful place for us to go. Now throughout this Psalm you hear references to God's word being mentioned. Now for whoever it was that wrote this Psalm that would have been the scriptures of the Old Testament, maybe even only part of the scriptures of the Old Testament depending on when the Psalm was written. Looking back at Genesis all the way through to Deuteronomy through the historical books and some of the other books that we have there. For us though we have the amazing privilege of God's completed revelation, we have the whole Bible and that means that we can take the principles from this Psalm and apply them to the whole of God's word. So Psalm 119 for us is a song about the Bible and that makes it immensely helpful for us as we think about the place that the Bible has in our lives. And so I want us just to consider that for a wee while this morning and we're going to ask two very simple questions in regard to the Bible. What is it and why bother reading it? If I was asked to ask you to pick up the Bible, either physical book or to take out your phone and open your Bible app and to ask you the question, what are you reading? What is it? What would be the words that would come to mind? What's the first things that would pop into your head? Maybe we would have words like this, revelation.

That's what the Bible is. It's God's revealing of himself to us. Maybe the word gospel would come to mind and again that's what it is, the good news of Jesus Christ. Maybe the word history would come to mind, especially when we're in the Old Testament reading through long passages of historical narrative bringing us back into the past. Or maybe we would think of the Bible as the story of salvation. Some people today speak of the Bible as drama, as God's mighty acts unfold across the ages of history and as we consider where we fit into all of that. And everything that these words convey is true. The Bible is revelation.

It is historical. It is good news. It is drama. It's the greatest story ever told. But when we come to Psalm 119, it doesn't use any of those words. It uses some very different words to describe the Bible. In fact, it uses eight key terms to describe God's communication to us. And if you were to read the whole of Psalm 119, you'll see that they come up again and again and again. And I've listed them for you here. Word, law, precepts, commandments, testimonies, rules, statutes, promises. You can see them from the very beginning of the Psalm. There's verses one to nine. You can see them all coming up there. I've highlighted them in bold. The law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commands, rules, statutes again, word. You go a little bit further on, you find the word promises. Now, you look at that kind of list and you think, oh, that sounds a bit intimidating. It can also be a little bit heavy. I want to persuade everyone here today that the Bible is wonderful. But these kind of words, you might think, well, Thomas, you're not selling it very well. People are put off by concepts like law, statutes, precepts, rules. These terms can be quite offensive, particularly to our 21st century identity of self-independence. We don't like this kind of thing being imposed on us at all. Now, we think that that's a modern thing, but really there's nothing new about it at all. Because if you read through the rest of the Old Testament, you see that it's a record of people constantly and repeatedly resisting God's instruction to them. In fact, that's what went wrong at the very beginning in Genesis 3, Adam and

Eve, resisting and rebelling against God's instruction. Consequently, every human heart is inclined that way. Even young children love to defy instruction. There's a great way of testing this, sometimes in the simplest of ways. You can get a law, a precept or commandment.

You go into an office or a room, you get the smell of wet paint. You see a sign. It says, wet paint, don't touch. What's the first thing you do? Oh, yeah, it is wet. There's loads of other examples when we do exactly the same thing. In fact, I was at, when we were away in London, we went for a tour of the Emirates Stadium where Arsenal Football Club played. And we were right at the side of the pitch, but they were saying, you're not allowed in the pitch. And of course, that just made it so tempting. You just were like, oh, I just wanted to go in the pitch so much. That's the effect that rules can have on us.

[7 : 04] So if I was trying to market and celebrate the Bible to you today, if I was trying to convince the skeptic that, you know, the Bible is a wonderful thing for you to read, words like that are probably not the ones that we would choose to use. But Psalm 119, the great song celebrating God's Word, celebrating the Bible, it doesn't avoid using words like these.

In fact, there's 176 verses in this Psalm. And one of these words appears in 169 of those verses. Now, is that because the Psalmist is kind of a crazed fanatic for legalistic religion? No. It's because the person who wrote the Psalm knows that these words describe something wonderful. And that's what I hope that we're going to discover today. So we'll go through them one by one very quickly. It talks about God's Word. How can a young man keep his way pure by guarding it according to your word? Now, sometimes the best way to approach a word like that is just to think of it in the most simple terms, that this is describing what someone says. When we talk about the Bible, when we talk about the Word of God, what we simply mean is that God is speaking. Behind every word written on a page is a voice, God speaking. Now, there's a whole sermon alone in that because it's utterly astonishing that God is speaking to you. Even 60 seconds of reflection on the magnitude of God and the insignificance of humanity tells us that it's utterly incredible that

God is talking to you. And that's what we have in the Bible. It's God's mouthpiece, God's Word. And to many people, maybe that word's quite acceptable. The next one, though, is not so popular. Law. Open my eyes that I maybe hold wondrous things out of your law.

Now, that word, law, is actually the word, the Hebrew word Torah. And it's a word you may have heard of. And we'll come to talk about the law as the Torah. And it's a word that basically means teaching or instruction. And that instantly changes the flavor of the word. Law sends to sound oppressive teaching and instruction, not so much at all. And it's a concept that lies at the heart of the relationship that God has with his people, the covenant relationship that God has with his people. Because his people are his, he teaches them and instructs them how to live. His law is their guide. Now, notice that order. It's because that his people, he gives them his law. So that means that it's relationship first, law second. Law does not establish the relationship. It's not God saying, do this, do that, do the next thing. And then I might consider a relationship with you. It's the other way around. It's like you, you are mine. Therefore, I'm going to give you these laws.

Now, we can often think that, that law is restrictive oppressive, but only a moment's reflection tells us that that's not the case. Because when you think about somebody being taught or instructed, does that restrict them? Or does that make them flourish? And you can think lots of examples. One that comes often to mind is the violin. Pick up a violin and do anything. Is that going to be a pleasant sound for you? It was awful. But if someone's taught, taught how to, to, to use that instrument properly, then it's beautiful. Same as a sailing boat. Imagine you sat in a sailing boat out in the bay there and there was an instructor with you. If they tell you what to do, is that going to restrict you? No. It's going to allow you to flourish. Laws that instruct you and teach you are not going to make your life rubbish. It's going to open the door to wondrous things, as the verse here describes.

[11 : 33] Number three is precepts. Make me understand the way of your precepts and I'll meditate on your wondrous works. Now, that word that we have for precepts is related to the idea of having a duty of care towards somebody. And so that, that's the concept that we need to have in mind. The basic idea of the word can actually mean to visit somebody. And it's the idea of exercising care towards another. So imagine you're a schoolteacher and you take all your kids, you take 30 kids, 37 year olds to Inverness and you park near the East Gate Centre and you say, right, we'll see you at the castle in the half an hour. Off you go. Of course you wouldn't. You would pound that group with precepts, wouldn't you?

Or why would you do that? Because they're under your care. And so precepts are there to keep people safe. It's all about exercising a duty of care. Number four is commandments.

Your hands have made in fashion be, give me understanding that I may learn your commandments. Now, commandments are really self-explanatory. They're statements that carry authority.

And I think that's a crucial thing for us to remember that when commandments are put in place, they're put in place with the authority to do so. I think a great testing ground for this isn't football, where you often see controversy with referees' decisions are being made. Even now it's even more controversial because you have VA where referees' decisions are reviewed by somebody who's been watching on video. And often people don't like their outcome of that. Often people are frustrated. And I remember when it was first introduced, a couple of times people were almost refusing to comply with what had been said by the video assistant referee. And I remember hearing an interview with Pierre Luigi Collina, who's the head of, or he certainly was, I'm not sure if he still is, probably still is, the head of FIFA's refereeing committee. Those of you who watched Italian football in the 90s will remember him. He's a very good referee. And he said, you know, there was all this controversy about the rules. And he said something that I thought was fascinating. He said, these are the rules. These are the commands. They're being enforced. You don't have a choice whether you want to obey them or not. This is the way it is. And the reason he could say that is because he had the authority to do so. He is the international head of all referees.

Now, that's just football as a minor thing in the grand scheme of things. In terms of life, God has the authority to give commands. Why? Because he's the one who made us. He's our creator. And therefore, he can give us commandments. And of course, that's not to harm us. It's again, for our good, any sport, any driving situation, any nation is ruined when there's no rules, when there's no commandments. Number five is testimonies. And this is a really interesting word. I claim to your testimonies, O Lord, let me not be put to shame. The basic idea of that word testimony means to repeat or to return. And I think that's really interesting in terms of testimony because it's the idea of going back to the same thing again and again and again. And if you think about that, that makes sense in terms of the translation testimonies because if you imagine you were a witness of a crime, imagine you saw somebody steal a car from outside church today and you had to give evidence of that. What would you do? You would keep coming back to the fact that you saw it. You would keep repeating the fact that you saw that. You would return to it again and again and again. And it's emphasising how important it is to keep coming back to facts. And this is fascinating for us today because in our society today, a lot of people want there to be a relativism in terms of truth. So people will say, you know, well, in terms of truth, you can have yours,

[16 : 10] I'll have mine, we can happily live side by side. So people are very happy with the idea of truth being relative. But at the same time, everybody wants certainty about facts. So we want facts about climate change. We want facts about crime. We want facts about the rise in energy prices. And many people want facts about people's private lives. Nobody wants a world that ignores facts. And that's because we want to have something we can hold on to that we can keep coming back to. And the Sam uses that concept to describe God's word. Rules is our sixth one. That word can also be translated judgments. And if you go forward, you don't need to do it just now. But if you were to go forward to verse 120, you'd see the same word translated as judgments. It's all pointed to the idea of governing, government rules are enforced by those who are in government. Now, again, this is an example of a situation where we can be very easily put off the Bible. We think about the idea of rules, and we say, well, if the Bible is all about rules, I don't want it. But ask yourself the question, do you want bad government? Do you want bad government? So in a month or two, well, six weeks, we're going to have a new prime minister. Whoever it is, if they turn out to be terrible, I'm not saying that they will, but if they turn out to be terrible, would you vote for them? Would you campaign for them? Of course you wouldn't. Would you think to yourself, bad government is fantastic? No, nobody wants that. Good government, good rules, good judgment. It's all a wonderful thing. Statutes. Incline my heart to perform your statutes forever to the end. This word is related to the Hebrew word that conveys the idea of engraving something into stone. And so that's expressing the concept of permanence, binding force, and we use that language ourselves. If something is set in stone, then it's of perpetual importance and relevance. And again, we can think of that in a negative way, but when it comes to things that are really important, do we want them set in stone? Course we do.

The right of women to vote, free access to education, freedom of speech, democratic government, these are the things that everybody wants set in stone. And then last of all, we have promises. Again, I don't need to explain that word. Everyone agrees that that's a wonderful thing and everyone knows that broken promises can be one of the biggest sources of pain in our lives. So we've got all these words, eight words, word, law, precepts, commands, testimonies, rules, statutes, promises. Are they bad things? Course they're not. They're wonderful things. But there's something else that we need to notice in this Psalm, another word, a word that's more prominent than any of these ones. As I said, there's 176 verses in this Psalm and there's a single word that appears in 171 of them. Do you know what it is? You are. And of course that's addressed to God. You can see it there in the section on the screen. This Psalm is talking about God's word. He's the one speaking to us,

God's law. He's teaching us to flourish through that law, God's precepts. He's exercising care towards us, God's commands. He instructs and directs us as his creator, God's testimonies.

He's giving us facts that we can cling to, God's rules. He's the one who's in government, God's statutes, permanent, unchanging truths inscribed by God himself and God's promises.

And boy are those promises precious. All of them finding their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. When you pick up the Bible, that's what you're reading. You're reading God's word, his law, his precepts, his commands, his testimonies, his rules, his statutes, his promises and they are wonderful. No wonder Psalm 119 is singing for joy. And so if that's what we're reading, that I hope is helping us to answer our second question by bother reading it.

[21 : 18] I'm sure the answer is obvious, but it's worth just unpacking that a wee bit more. Why should you bother picking up the Bible for 15 minutes tonight or tomorrow morning? Why should you do that? Now maybe you do that already? Fantastic. Please keep doing it. Maybe you don't do that.

Maybe you used to do that. Why should you bother doing it? Well, again, this Psalm tells us, but it tells us more than what we've already seen. Not just the fact that this is God's communication to us. We need to look even deeper because we've seen, you know, we've seen one layer where we have these wonderful eight terms used to describe the Bible. We've seen another layer where the word viewer is telling us that all of this is coming from God, but there's another layer beneath that that we need to see. And it's probably the most important layer for every one of us. And you'll see that layer if you look at the section from 33 to 40, but you'll see it throughout the whole Psalm. This is just an example.

He says, teach me, give me understanding that I'll observe it with my whole heart. Lead me, I delight in it and climb my heart, turn my eyes, give me life, confirm to your servant, turn away the reports that I read, give me life. There are many, many more words like that in the Psalm. What's it telling you? It's telling you that the final layer in this Psalm is you. And that tells us that this Psalmist is not sitting down to compose a summary of the attributes of the Bible. This Psalmist, the man who wrote this Psalm is crying out for answer, for protection, for sustenance, for certainty, for liberty, for joy. And what

I want you to ask yourself is this, are these not the things that you crave? And is that not what the world around us is craving as well? And this is where we see that the language of Psalm 119 is not just bringing us to a clear understanding of God's word, it's bringing us back to a clear understanding of all the stuff that really matters in life. This is pointing us to all the things that are most important. It's a summary of the priorities that should shape every area of our lives. And I thought I would just summarise them for you. Because as I said, it's the biggest chapter in the Bible, there's a thousand sermons that we could preach on this. So I'm just giving you a non exhaustive summary of some of the key things that are incredibly important in life that this Psalm touches on. All related to that language of me, my, me, my. It's not an exhaustive list, but I've chosen eight things because I had eight things in section one. That means that I have a 16 point sermon, which I think is a new record. It's talking about education, learning, teaching, talking about direction. The Psalmist Christ lead me. He talks about walking a path. It speaks about protection. You see words like keep me, guard me, support the Psalms looking for help in times of trouble, liberty. He talks about walking in a wide place, certainty.

He talks about promises, trust, hope, happiness. You have words like delight, joy and rejoice, passion. You'll find words like love, hate, heart, soul, all speaking about the passion that you find in this writer. Now think back a moment to how off putting our first list seemed, law, precepts, commands, all that kind of stuff. You think, oh man, that's, nobody wants that. But this list, it's what everybody wants. These are the things we crave. These are the things that we work for. These are the things that we go to war to protect. This is what we want our children to have. These are the things that are foundational to our lives. And for all of us, our weekly routine is shaped by this kind of stuff. Education, well that's a bad example because it's a school holidays. But for all the children, normally, tomorrow morning, back at school. And I suppose maybe some people might still be studying if you're working on a course or whatever. You think about protection. How many of you are going to do things this week to protect your health? Whether that's to take medication that you need or whether it's to avoid eating certain things, maybe you have intolerances or you just want to improve your diet or whatever. How many of you are going to do stuff to protect yourself? We all are. Support. Can any of you go through this week alone? Are any of you going to walk out of this building? I do not want any contact with any other human for the next seven days at all. None of us are going to say that. Happiness. It's the holidays. Who's looking for a rubbish holiday? Nobody. Passion. Whether that's sport or work or friendship, music, whatever it is that we do, these are the things that drive us. This is the stuff that shapes every day of our lives. And as Christians, we would agree with that and endorse all of that. But we would add another thing to the list. If this is all the stuff that we're going to do, this is what's going to shape our routine.

[27 : 23] We would say, well, yeah, you should add another thing to that list. You should add Bible reading. So you know, in the business of this week, whether you're learning, working, whatever, enjoying things, don't forget to read your Bible. You should have that as another area of priority in your life. And I've often thought of Bible reading in that way to think, yeah, I've got loads of stuff to do, but I mustn't forget to do that. I must fit that in as well.

It's another thing on the list in my life. But is that right? Is that the kind of picture that Samahandara 19 is giving us? I don't think it is. Because Samahandara 19 is teaching us not that the Bible is one of the priorities in our lives. Samahandara 19 is teaching us that Bible reading is actually foundational to everything. So our list like that is wrong.

That's not how it should look. That's how it should look. What God teaches us in the Bible should shape everything that we do. So if you want to be educated, really educated, you want to understand history, humanity, reality, read the Bible, it will show you that Jesus Christ is at the centre of it all and that He is the explanation for it all. His influence is unparalleled. If you want direction in your life, read the Bible. Now that's not going to tell you, you know, like what you should buy Tesco's tomorrow. We don't mean in that kind of terms, but in terms of what to live for, in terms of what you should focus on with your time in the week ahead, read the Bible. It will show you that in Jesus, we can find true identity, purpose and direction. If you want protection, if you want to be diverted away from stuff that will wreck your life, read the Bible. If you want support when life is tough, comfort when your heart is broken, read the Bible. If you want liberty through freedom to start becoming everything that you are made to be, we read the Bible.

Certainty about truth, morality, life, death, the future, read the Bible. You think of how precious God's promises have been to us as a congregation over these past few days when we've laid one of our longer serving elder to rest. How precious the certainty that we have from God's word is in all of that. If you want happiness, if you want a joy that cannot be robbed by your circumstances, read the Bible. Jesus is calling us into a family of forgiveness, friendship and joy. And if you want a passion, if you want something that will give you real meaning and purpose and depth in your life, read the Bible, read about Jesus, read about him who came to die and to rise again so that you can have eternal life. Now, you might think to yourself, well, Thomas, that all sounds great, but it might seem, you know, I might say, well, yeah, that's all sounds fine, but it might seem like empty words. Well, I think we can test this. And I want to just conclude by testing it. Okay.

So if you think about being educated about life and humanity, our culture default thinking today is that humanity is functionally brilliant, but ontologically incidental. Now, what I mean by that is the fact that in terms of being who we are, ultimately, we're kind of a cosmic accident. But as people, we can still do wonderful things, functionally brilliant, ontologically incidental. Humanity is a collection of stuff that can do great things, we're getting better, but ultimately we're just stuff. That's what the world around us tells us. The Bible says the opposite. The Bible tells us that humanity is ontologically precious, but functionally broken. Which one do you think is true? You look at the news and you see children oppressed by horrible people. That's showing you ontologically precious people and functionally broken people.

[32 : 13] In terms of direction, culture says live for today, work hard in school, get a job, get a house, get rich, retire, enjoy life, die. The Bible says live for eternity. Which one do you think is better? In terms of protection, culture says go down any road you want. Just cover your tax, whether that's with alcohol, money, sex, whatever it may be. Go down, enjoy, indulge, fulfill yourself. And you know, if people get hurt along the way, so be it.

The Bible says don't go down that road in the first place. Stay within boundaries. So often our culture's idea of a good night out is loads of alcohol, a fair bit of rudeness.

You know, if it goes really well, you'll get into a frenzy where you make a complete fool of yourself and you can maybe cap it off with some vomiting on your way home. A biblical night out, and there is such a thing, a biblical night out is a meal with wonderful food. Friends round a table, talking, laughing, rejoicing together. Which one do you think is wiser?

In terms of support, culture says I'll distract you so you can take your mind off things. The Bible says Jesus will hold you forever. In terms of liberty, culture says do what you like, the Bible says do what you're made for. In terms of certainty, our culture changes all the time. The Bible is set in stone, never changes. In terms of happiness, culture maybe can give us many smiles that will last a while. The Bible promises us joy in Jesus Christ that will never end. And in terms of passion, the culture around us gives us many things to be passionate about, and that's all good. But the Bible gives you two great priorities to shape everything. Love God and love one another. Which one's better? No wonder the Sam says, oh Lord how much I love your law. So tonight or tomorrow morning when you've got the choice between 15 minutes of reading your Bible or 15 minutes of filtering through the latest installment of interesting news diluted with garbage on social media, what are you going to choose? Now I'm not saying don't go on social media, I'm not saying that at all, but I'm just saying don't give social media a place in your life that means you've got no room for the Bible. And not just social media, newspaper, book, whatever, TV, whatever it is, we all need to give time to God's Word in our lives. And so I want to just close with the question, what is the next step for you in terms of reading your Bible? Is it to start? And it's okay if it is. It's completely okay. If you're sitting here today thinking,

Thomas I've never really read my Bible. That's okay, I'm not kind of here to have a go at you at that at all. I just want to ask you okay, well what's the next step for you? And if you've never not started then your next step is easy, it's just to start. Maybe your next step is to restart. Maybe you think, oh I was good at it once, but I'm not now.

[35 : 33] And then you're crushed by guilt. You don't need to be crushed by guilt. We just move forward. Think okay, I'm going to restart. I'm going to get better in a better routine. Is your next step to slow down? And I ask that question because sometimes life is so busy. Reading the Bible is calm down to everything else. It's like you try to read it as fast as you can and then on with the rest of the day. Maybe you need to slow down. I think okay, I'm going to read maybe a little bit less, but I'm going to think a whole lot more.

Maybe your next step is to ask someone to help you if there's bits you don't understand and we would love to do that. Maybe your next step is to offer to help somebody to say, I'd love to read the Bible with you. Every one of us here has a next step to take in order to read in terms of our Bible reading. And so I want you all to think about that.

Why should you do that? Well, let's go all the way back to the very first thing we said in our service today. Jesus said to his disciples, are you also going to turn away? And Peter said to whom else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.