

Delight in God's Word

Psalm 119:137-144

- ¹³⁷ You are righteous, O LORD, and your judgments are right.
- ¹³⁸ You have appointed your decrees in righteousness and in all faithfulness.
- ¹³⁹ My zeal consumes me because my foes forget your words.
- ¹⁴⁰ Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it.
- ¹⁴¹ I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.
- ¹⁴² Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and your law is the truth.
- ¹⁴³ Trouble and anguish have come upon me, but your commandments are my delight.
- ¹⁴⁴ Your decrees are righteous forever; give me understanding that I may live.

Our scripture from Psalm 119 is the eighteenth section of twenty-two such sections, each with eight lines. In turn, each of the eight lines draws on eight terms: law, decrees, statutes, commandments, ordinances, word, precepts, and promise. The Psalm has the impact of deploying and redeploying each of eight terms associated with torah in twenty-two different affirmations and makes unmistakable the centrality of torah, the law and direction of God, for the life of faith. The psalmist models for us delighting in God's word!

For the psalmist God's word is not about legalism: however the Calvinist strain of Protestantism has sometimes experienced solidarity with those who are accused of "exhibitionist legalism." Sometimes it was surely deserved, as when the Scottish Calvinist James Durham wrote an exposition of the commandments in 1675 that managed to see as clear violations of the Ten Commandments such things as sleeping in church and talking during the sermon. The Reformers interpreted the commandment to honor one's parents as compelling obedience to the state! The Puritans deducted that sobriety and modesty in dress is entailed in the prohibition of adultery! But in reality, God's word and law is a summons to life in its fullness, something in which we can all

delight. We can experience God's law as the gift of rightly ordered relationships to God and neighbor. **D. Cameron Murchison**

While making the rounds during church coffee hour, commentator Matthew Fitzgerald occasionally hears members speak harmful words to one another. The harmful words that get repeated most often are these: "Don't worry. God has a plan for you." This is a close cousin to another remark: "God would not give you more than you can handle." These comments are equally destructive and equally difficult to stamp out.

"Don't worry. God has a plan for you." The saying aims to reassure, and this means that its recipient has probably occasioned the phrase by confessing feelings of aimlessness, dissatisfaction, lack of hope, or what the psalmist calls "trouble and anguish." Unfortunately, the remark, "Don't worry. God has a plan for you," is not so much a theological statement as it is a request to change the subject to the weather, please.

Such remarks indicate that many of us have a caricature of providence that we are very reluctant to let go of. This is the case because the belief that God has planned our lives brings with it the assurance that God *cares about our lives*. With that assurance comes great relief, for with God's plan comes some sense of order. We would rather suffer a cruel divinely ordered plan than a meaningless existence, because we are mired in either/or thinking that admits only two choices: (1) God's hand must determine every last turn of each individual's course, or (2) life is one random event after another. Either everything happens for a reason, or everything is illogical. We are either flying by the seat of God's pants, or we are the children of an omnipotent nitpicker.

Fortunately, in verse 143, the psalmist draws upon his own suffering to suggest a way out of this kind of thinking. The psalmist offers a new way of understanding God's care—or at least an understanding so ancient that it seems new: "Trouble and anguish have come upon me, but your commandments are my delight." In other words, when the psalmist's life begins to come apart, to bleed outside its own boundaries, he finds

reassurance in the fact that God has given him a sturdy frame (God's commandments or divine law) in which to live.

In our churches we have an appreciation for each individual's religious freedom. According to Luther, the first function of the law is to convict us as sinners. As a result we do not appreciate the positive dimensions of God's law, leaving many of us hard pressed to see it as a delight. The psalmist knows none of this. Instead, the psalmist knows that God cares for him personally, longs for him to live differently, and wants his life to correspond to divine intentions. He believes that God's intentions are best for him. In other words, the psalmist knows that through the law God cares for him, and in the law God has a plan for him. Questions about *why* God has let him suffer "trouble and anguish" do not even surface. Instead, the psalmist celebrates the fact that God has told him *how* to live.

So, how do we discover God's plan for us? How, in the face of life's chaos, do we find the psalmist's "understanding" so that, like the psalmist, we "may live"? A good first step is to admit that our own needs and instincts are not trustworthy guides. If we want to follow God's plan, we must first give up our own. If we want a share of the psalmist's delight, we must trade some of our freedom for it. We must let God tell us how to live.

This point was forcefully made by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in their reflection on the first commandment:

Because we live in a culture where submission to any authority other than our own egos is considered unduly authoritarian and unfair, command-obedience is difficult for us. We have freed ourselves from all external authority except servitude to the self. This we hail as freedom, though Israel testifies that slavery (particularly slavery as the necessity to do "what I want to do") comes in many guises.... So the issue is not *if* we shall live under some external command, but rather *which* external command will have its way with us.

Instead of embracing the cultural beliefs of individualism and its bedrock assumption that individuals should be able to do as we please, let

us remember that the Christian doctrine of sin holds that we are flawed creatures who, when "set free," will typically do the wrong thing.

Matthew led a monthly Bible study at a nursing home. It is a confining place whose residents have sacrificed much of their autonomy in order to live in a sheltered community with expert care. It took about a dozen visits to defeat his assumption that his friends there must be miserable, to realize that the residents are joyful in the face of their restrictions. He was still trying to understand that they might be joyful *because* of them.

In a Bible study, they took a look at the Ten Commandments. Matthew asked the group which of the ten they thought was the most difficult to follow. One wise woman thought for a moment and then said, "That question doesn't make sense. Given my age and where I live, there are at least five of these commandments I couldn't break if I wanted to." He asked her how this felt.

Without missing a beat, she said, "*It feels wonderful.*" **Matthew Fitzgerald**

We are not dealing in escapism here. There is an alternation, a genuine dialogue between the psalmist's reflections on God's word (torah) and reflections on life. Verses 137-138 are addressed to God: "You are righteous ... your judgments ... you have appointed." Verses 139-141 focus back on the author: "My zeal consumes me ... your servant loves [your promise] ... I am small and despised." The section concludes with an affirmation and a plea: "Your decrees are righteous forever; give me understanding that I may live" (v. 144).

The psalm is about life, asserting that there is no life apart from God's word (torah), God's law-instruction-teaching. Clint McCann and others have argued persuasively that the term torah needs to be interpreted broadly, to include not simply written material but also God's ongoing revelation in the natural world and in and through the lives of individuals and nations. This understanding points us to the understanding that God is present and active in and through every aspect of life. When we wander away from that awareness, we need a vehicle of return. Psalm 119 provides a meditative means to

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refocus our thinking and our very being on the gift of our ongoing relationship with the sacred. **David R. Ruhe**

We can indeed “delight in God’s word” as it leads us to fullness of life and a right relationship to God and one another!

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