

***“TEACH ME, LORD:” A PRAYER FOR GOD’S WORD TO DO ITS WORK***  
***PSALM 119:33-40***

I have been using some kind of “read through the Bible in a year” plan for longer than I can remember.

I’ve read through the Bible chronologically (like we’re doing this year); I’ve used the Navigator “Book-at-a-time” plan and I’ve used the Navigator 4-daily reading plan (two OT and two NT each day); I’ve used M’Cheyne’s plan which takes the reader through the OT once and NT and Psalms twice; I’ve read just the OT and just the NT. And all that reading is in addition to the regular daily and weekly study I do for sermons and messages. So I’ve read the Bible a few times.

And all through those readings, there is still a daily temptation to forget what has been read. As Robert Murray M’Cheyne warned his church members, there is a danger of formality when we read Scripture:

We are such weak creatures that any regularly returning duty is apt to degenerate into a lifeless form. The tendency of reading the Word by a fixed rule may, in some minds, be to create this skeleton religion. This is to be the peculiar sin of the last days – “Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.”

But he also warns that there is a danger of carelessness when we read the Bible:

Few *tremble* at the Word of God. Few, in reading it, hear the voice of Jehovah, which is full of majesty. Some, by having so large a portion, may be tempted to weary of it, as Israel did of the daily manna, saying – “Our soul loatheth this light bread;” and to read it in a slight and careless manner. This would be fearfully provoking to God. Take heed lest that word be true of you...

In an effort to encourage my own soul about the centrality and purpose of the Word of God, a few years ago I began an effort to preach through Psalm 119 — preaching one of the 22 sections at the beginning of each year. This series is a means of reminding us of the importance of the Word of God and even more, it is a reminder of what the Word can do in us.

You may remember that this psalm is the longest chapter in the Bible — 176 verses. And it is unique in that it is an extended acrostic. So the 176 verses are divided into 22 8-verse sections — one section for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And within each section, each line begins with that letter of the alphabet, as a means to help the hearers remember and memorize the psalm (that’s why many of your Bibles have words you may not know between each of these sections — those are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet).

So just who is this psalmist? We don't know. But we do know much about his situation from what he writes in these 176 verses: he is a young man who is being "derided, oppressed, persecuted, and that by those who despise the divine word" (apostasy is all around him). In fact, his own Israelite government is hostile to true faith in the covenant God, Yahweh (vv. 23, 46, 161). "He is lying in bonds (v. 61, cf. v. 83), expecting death (v. 109), and recognises in his affliction...God's...humbling, and in the midst of it God's word is his comfort and his wisdom, but he also yearns for help, and earnestly prays for it. The whole Psalm is a prayer for stedfastness in the midst of an ungodly, degenerate race, and in the midst of great trouble, which is heightened by the pain he feels at the prevailing apostasy, and a prayer for ultimate deliverance..." [Keil & Delitzsch, 243-4.]

The Psalmist expresses his response to the Word of God in many ways — delight, joy, gratitude, praise, longing for, treasuring, trusting, and keeping. But in this section, the theme is humility and submission; humility permeates this section. And that the writer is humble before the Lord means further that he is dependent on God and the Word. He wants God's Word to change him — the very thing the Word of God is given to us to do.

One more thing you need to know about this particular section — each of the first seven verses (vv. 33-39) begins with a verb that is a "causative" — i.e., it means, "cause me to..." So even though the rest of this psalm contains many requests, this particular section particularly reads as a prayer to God — "Would you please do this in me through Your Word?"

So the prayer of the psalmist serves as an appropriate template for us to pray as we open the Scriptures for ourselves as well.

-----  
*IF WE DESIRE CHANGE FROM GOD'S WORD, HE WILL CAUSE IT.*

*ASK HIM TO DO HIS WORD'S WORK IN YOU.*  
-----

"God's Word gives understanding — I must yield to it." (Barrick)

Here are eight requests from the psalmist to the Lord for the Word of God to do its work in him:

- 1. TEACH Me Your Statutes (v. 33)**
- 2. Make Me UNDERSTAND Your Law (v. 34)**
- 3. Make Me LIVE Your Commands (v. 35)**
- 4. BEND My Heart to Your Will (v. 36)**
- 5. Keep My Eyes from Being Attracted by VANITY (v. 37)**
- 6. Make Me REALIZE Your Promises (v. 38)**
- 7. Keep Me From SHAMEFULNESS (v. 39)**
- 8. Give Me Life Through Your RIGHTEOUSNESS (v. 40)**

*IF WE DESIRE CHANGE FROM GOD'S WORD, HE WILL CAUSE IT.*

*ASK HIM TO DO HIS WORD'S WORK IN YOU.*

Here are eight requests from the psalmist to the Lord for the Word of God to do its work in him.

### 1. TEACH Me Your Statutes (v. 33)

- I was talking with a young mother recently and she was telling me about her son who was expressing some defiance and rebellion by using words like, “mine!” and “no!” So I asked her, “why did you teach him those words?” Isn’t it interesting that he didn’t need to be taught words of rebellion and disobedience. And neither do we. Our flesh naturally is inclined towards sin and evil; it does not need to be taught how to sin. Since Adam, we’ve always known and been inclined to sin.
- But we have not known or been inclined to obedience and righteousness; which is why the psalmist starts where he does in this section: ***teach me***. He must be taught by God and His Word because the psalmist cannot understand on his own. He is ignorant.
  - ✓ There are hidden depths to God’s revelation that cannot be understood without God’s aid.

- *Psa. 25:4 Make me know Your ways, O LORD; Teach me Your paths.*
- *Psa. 25:9 He leads the humble in justice, And He teaches the humble His way.*
- *Psa. 27:11 Teach me Your way, O LORD, And lead me in a level path Because of my foes.*
- *Psa. 86:11 Teach me Your way, O LORD; I will walk in Your truth; Unite my heart to fear Your name.*
- *Is. 48:17 Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, “I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, Who leads you in the way you should go.*

- ✓ What the psalmist particularly wants to know from God is ***the way of Your statutes***. This word ***way*** is used 67x in the Psalms, and 13x in this psalm. There is a roadway — a course of life — that is demanded by the statutes of God. Like a traveler without an atlas or Google maps, the psalmist says, “I know there is only one way to go and that way is through Your Word, so teach me that Word.”
- ✓ And even more specifically, he asks to know the way of God’s ***statutes***. That word refers to something that has been prescribed, marked out, and engraved. In other words, “you’ve set the course and direction of life in your Word — teach it to me.”
- ✓ This request is not so different from what Paul says to Timothy about Scripture in **2 Tim. 3:16f.**
- ✓ If the psalmist or we will know the way to go in life, we need God’s Word. It is the compass. It

is the North Star. It is the road map. It is the instruction booklet. It is the unalterable law and decree. There is nothing else to point us to how to live than this Word. And if God does not teach it to us, we are hopeless indeed. So he says, “Teach me.”

- And having said, “Teach me,” the psalmist then also makes a promise: ***and I will observe it to the end.*** “If You teach me, I will obey.” There is some question about this word, “end.” The word’s most basic meaning is “because,” or “consequence,” and this is one of the only places it’s translated “end.” But a better translation is probably, “reward” (Ps. 19:11; Prov. 22:4). So what the psalmist is saying is, “If you teach Me the way to live, I will obey and keep your commandments as my reward and treasure in life.”
  - ✓ This is the psalmist’s way of saying that the life that is obedient to Scripture is worthwhile.
  - ✓ Are Scripture and its commands a treasure to you? Paul says that the Word of Christ should live richly within us. That’s the goal and end of Scripture — not just instruction for the sake of instruction, but so that we will come to treasure this Word and its author.

*“John S. Dunne tells of early Spanish sailors who reached the continent of South America after an arduous voyage. The caravel sailed into the headwaters of the Amazon, an expanse of water so wide the sailors presumed it to be a continuation of the Atlantic Ocean. It never occurred to them to drink the water, since they expected it to be saline, and as a result some of these sailors died of thirst. That scene of men dying of thirst even as their ships doted on the world’s largest source of fresh water has become for me a metaphor for our age. Some people starve to death spiritually while all around them manna rots.” [Yancey, *Finding God in Unexpected Places*, p. x.]*

- “Teach me Your statutes” is a recognition that there is life and direction in this Word and we need the Lord to teach it to us.
- “Teach me Your statutes” is a request for spiritual education. But it’s not enough to be spiritually educated with information. We have to comprehend and understand, which is the psalmist’s next prayer...

## 2. Make Me **UNDERSTAND** Your Law (v. 34)

- This is a request for spiritual illumination. As one writer has said, “it is of little value to have sight without insight.” So the psalmist asks the Lord to give him understanding. He makes similar requests throughout this psalm: vv. 27, 73, 125, 144, 169.
- What he desires here is enlightenment and comprehension and discernment.

- It's not enough to simply understand the meaning of the words; the teaching must also produce wisdom. This week we read Job 28:28. At the end of a chapter where he asserts that man cannot find or buy wisdom, he asks, “where then does wisdom come from?” (v. 20) It comes from the Lord, who knows it, sees it, and declares it. If we want wisdom, we will only find it in Him and in fearing Him (v. 28a). And when one has God’s wisdom, he will *depart from evil*, and that is *understanding* (comprehension, illumination — the same word as in Ps. 119:34).
- What the psalmist is asking for is what we call in the NT illumination — the Holy Spirit enlightening God’s people to comprehend the written Word of God (2 Cor. 2:12-14).
- And the reason he desires this is so that he not only obeys the Word externally, but so that there is also internal obedience — so that he would *keep it with all my heart*. He wants a whole-hearted obedience to God. He wants to comply with the law (*observe* in vv. 33 and 34 are the same Heb. root). But even more, he wants his heart to be enlightened and he wants his heart to also keep it.

*“The word of God is the only power that can subdue the rebellion of our heart. There is a power in our fallen nature which revolts against divine truth, and which nothing human can overcome. No teaching of man will do it, not even that of your father and mother. The teaching of the church and of the most beloved pastors will not do it, nor time-worn tradition, which is the teaching of the ages. All this is as powerless as the slenderest thread to lift the weight which presses us down. To make the kingdom of God enter our hearts we need a battering-ram that can overthrow the strongest walls, and that ram is the Word of God.” [J.H. Merle D’Aubigne, Let Christ be Magnified, p. 15.]*

- So in his first two requests, the psalmist has asked God to educate him and illuminate him. But neither of those are ultimate ends. He wants instruction and understanding so that he can live what God has commanded. That is the third request.

### 3. Make Me **LIVE** Your Commands (v. 35)

- This is a request for spiritual transformation. He recognizes he needs instruction and illumination. But even those are worthless without transformation. So he asks, *make me walk in the path of your commandments.*
  - ✓ The **path** that the psalmist refers to here is a visible, well-worn pathway. It is long established. This is the pathway of obedience that all the obedient saints of God have traveled. It’s not new and novel; it’s not innovative; but it is old and sure. This is the way all holy people have always lived. They have lived this way because the pathway is given by God’s commands — it is the *pathway of Your commands*. The commands are the authoritative decree and will of God.

- ✓ So the psalmist says, “You have decreed your will and given me a desire to do that will; now give me the power to perform that will.” This request is an affirmation that on our own we are not only ignorant about God’s commands, but also impotent to act on those commands.
- ✓ It is an affirmation that he cannot live his spiritual life on His own. He is dependent on God’s grace not only to instruct him and give him wisdom, but also to be obedient. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:6.

*“[The psalmist] in the former verses, had begged for light, now for strength to walk according to this light. We need not only light to know our way, but a heart to walk in it. Direction is necessary because of the blindness of our minds; and the effectual impulses of grace are necessary because of the weakness of our hearts.” [Thomas Manton, quoted by Boice, Living by the Book, 48.]*

- And the reason he asks for this power from God is because **I delight in it** — that is, he delights in living this way and he delights in what God has commanded.

*“Delight is the marrow of religion. ‘God loveth a cheerful giver’ (2 Cor. ix. 7), and accepts obedience, only when it is given, not when it is forced. He loves the service of that man, who considers it his highest privilege to render [obedience]....Fervent prayer and cheerful obedience mark the experience of the thriving Christian. As a true ‘child of Zion, he is joyful in his king’ (Ps. cxlix. 2); he loves his service, and counts it ‘perfect freedom’ — the rule of love, mercy, and grace.” [Bridges, 85.]*

- So, having asked for instruction, illumination, and transformation with his first three requests, the psalmist asks for some specific things to be transformed...

#### 4. BEND My Heart to Your Will (v. 36)

- For him to live a truly obedient life, he must change inwardly first. His heart and desires need to change. They are bent away from God and so he says, “bend my heart to the direction of your testimonies.” This is the same principle Jesus teaches in Lk. 6:45; 8:14. The desires of the world “choke the seed of the word so that no fruit is brought to [maturity].” [JFB]
- The heart must change because it is inclined toward **dishonest gain**. These are profits that are made by violence and plunder. There is nothing just in the way they are acquired. The allure of gold has shimmered and drawn the heart of man away so that he is hardened to the consequences of how he gains his profits. He doesn’t care what happens to others; he just wants his money. And that’s the inclination of every ungodly man.
- So the heart must change. As we’ve seen in 1 John, the love of the world cannot coexist with a love for God. So to love God, the love of the world must be eradicated. The heart must change.

- Paul says, “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10). So what must change? The love of money must be removed. That’s what the psalmist is asking — change me inwardly — move my will not to a desire for its fleshly desires, but bend my will to ***your testimonies***.
  - ✓ Instead of asserting his will and his desires, the psalmist says, “You have testified (in a court of law). You have affirmed your will and the moral duty of all men. Incline my heart to be obedient to that will and not its own will.”
  - ✓ The heart is a picture of the primary source of desires for all men. If you want to change, it doesn’t happen magically by reading the Scriptures but it does happen supernaturally by the Lord using the Scriptures to change your heart inclinations and yearnings.
- The psalmist wants transformation. Specifically, he wants his heart to be changed. And as a reflection of his changed heart he also asks...

## 5. Keep My Eyes from Being Attracted by VANITY (v. 37)

- Similarly to verse 36, here the psalmist asks for his eyes not to look at ***vain things***.
  - ✓ These vain things are items that are hollow, worthless, and trivial. They have no divine or intrinsic worth. They are opposed to God and morally evil.
  - ✓ He wants God to ***turn away my eyes from looking*** — that is, he doesn’t want to be attracted by or find pleasure in things that are unstable at best and under the judgment of God at the worst.
  - ✓ And God will do that as God also ***revives me in Your ways***. This means to “quicken — to give life or to sustain life.” The psalmist is asking to be made alive to the ways of God; and more specifically he is asking to be made alive *in* (by, through) His ways. “Through Your Word, help me to see the things that are worthless and to pursue only the things that are of value eternally.”
  - ✓ So this is a prayer that God would give him the power to resist temptation through the Word.
- Stop here for just a moment. It might be tempting to say, “this writer has it all together spiritually. He doesn’t have any problems. He can pray this way and talk this way because he is a super spiritual saint. But that’s not me. I must not be a follower of God or a Christian.” But look again at his requests — teach me, illumine me, transform me, incline my heart, turn my eyes away.
  - ✓ He says ***teach me*** because he is ignorant.
  - ✓ He says ***give me understanding*** because he doesn’t comprehend or have discernment.
  - ✓ He says ***make me walk*** because he cannot walk on his own.
  - ✓ He says ***incline my heart*** because his heart is not naturally inclined to obedience and it is inclined to ***dishonest gain***.

- ✓ He says ***turn my eyes away from vanity*** because his eyes are naturally drawn toward the empty and fruitless things in life.
- ✓ These are the prayers of a righteous man; he doesn't pray these things because he's unsaved, but he prays these things because he *is saved* and his flesh still craves ungodly things. He is saved by grace but he is still in the fight against sin. And the same is still true of us; if you are fighting against sin, it is almost always because your *are* saved. Those who aren't saved don't pray this way — they want to be freed from the consequences of sin, but they don't care about being transformed by God from the inside out. So if you are struggling against sin, be hopeful for two reasons:
  1. The struggle against sin is a mark of your salvation. This fight is the fight of the redeemed.
  2. There is help in that fight against sin.
- The psalmist wants his feet (v. 35), heart (v. 36) and eyes (v. 37) changed. He wants them changed so that he might realize the promises of God...

## 6. Make Me REALIZE Your Promises (v. 38)

- The phrase ***establish Your word*** means something like “make me realize Your promises...”

“...all of God’s Word is a promise — a promise of life to those who repent of sin and determine to go in God’s way and a promise of death and judgment for those who reject the gospel message. The psalmist is clinging to the promise of life because he fears, or stands in awe of, God.” [Boice, 51.]

- So he says, “I want to realize the truth of your promises so that it ***produces reverence of You***.” The word reverence is ***fear*** and can mean reverence, but it can also mean “terror” that God will condemn one to Hell in His righteous judgment.
- If the psalmist is going to have his heart changed, it will come through a meditation on the gracious provisions of God for His people and on the solemn warnings of judgment against those who do not belong to God. Now notice something else...
- The reason that the psalmist wants to realize the promises of God and fear God is so that he will be kept from a life of shamefulness.

## 7. Keep Me From SHAMEFULNESS (v. 39)

- The question in v. 39 is what kind of *reproach* (or, shame) is he referencing?
  - ✓ It could be the shame of living a life of ungodliness that undermines his testimony of God.
  - ✓ It could be the shame that unbelievers hurl at him because he is living a genuinely godly life. He doesn't want to experience scorn from unbelievers for his faithfulness.
  - ✓ It could be either. (Commentators seem to be fairly evenly split.) Though I am inclined to think it is the latter — he *dreads* and is fearful of the mocking that will come for his faithfulness.
- In both cases, the reason he gives for his request is appropriate — *the ordinances* (judgments, decisions, and rules of God) *are good*. God's way and decrees are always good. So the one who is inclined to living a life of shame needs to remember that God's Word will not only keep him from living that way, but God's decrees are good. And the one who is mocked for his faith can remain steadfast when he gets weary of living righteously by remembering that all God's Word is good and there will be good provision for those who endure to the end.
- And because he wants God's Word to do all this work — education, illumination, and transformation, the psalmist makes one summary request —

## 8. Give Me Life Through Your RIGHTEOUSNESS (v. 40)

- The psalmist *longs for God's precepts* — he desires God's righteous laws. In the same way that he later would say he desires God's salvation (v. 174), here he wants to see the culmination of God's Word in his life.
- The psalmist desires these laws because they are *righteous* (*precepts* is parallel to *righteousness*). And he knows that as he longs for those righteous laws, they will *revive* him — give him life.
- Life comes through the righteousness of God.
  - ✓ It has always been that way — consider Abraham's righteousness as a gift of God's grace (Gen. 15:6).
  - ✓ And it is true in the NT even more obviously through the work of Christ — Rom. 3:20, 24-28.
  - ✓ Spiritual life comes through God's righteousness.
- So combine all these requests, and the psalmist is asking one thing: "cause me to come alive through Your Word."

**CONCLUSION:** Cf. *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, pp. 76, 101.

Like you and I, this psalmist had access in some way to the Scriptures. He heard them read and explained in the temple and synagogue. But he wanted more. So he asked God to do in him, through His Word, what he could not do himself — educate me, illuminate me, and transform me.

As we read the Bible today and this week and this year, this is a fitting set of prayer requests for us as well — educate us, illuminate us, and transform us. As you read the Bible this year, will you pray that for yourself? And then let's see what God will do to answer those prayers in the coming year.