

## God's Righteous Word and the Right Response of our Emotions (Ps 119:137-144)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on March 1, 2009

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I hope you realize and appreciate the treasure you have in your hand, and the tremendous privilege it is to be able to own a complete copy of the Bible in your own language in your own house – something no one in Bible times was able to do, and something hardly anyone was able to do for about 95% of human history. What a precious privilege we have!

In John MacArthur's book *Sufficiency in Christ* he writes of his love for old Bibles from history:

'my favorite is a Bible from sixteenth-century England, one of the earliest printed copies of God's Word. The top third of this Bible is covered with the blood of its original owner. My friend let me hold it in my hands, and tears came to my eyes as I leafed through it. How did blood get on the pages of that Bible? When Bloody Mary ruled England, she terrorized Protestants, murdering as many as she could. Her soldiers would spill the person's blood, then take his Bible and dip it deep into the blood. A few of those Bibles have been preserved and are known as Martyrs' Bibles. Scientists have tested the paper and confirmed that the dark stains on every page of my friend's Bible are human blood.

I examined that Bible carefully, page by page. I could see where it was well worn from being studied. There are water stains, as if from tears, and places where a thumb had frayed favorite pages. This was someone's most valuable possession, and his or her blood is there to prove it.

In sad contrast, [modern Christians treat Scripture so lightly and] take their Bibles for granted, forgetting that many have given their lives just to own one copy. If the church today placed as high a value on God's Word as those martyrs did, perhaps there would not be so many people running off to experts in human theory ... Scripture hasn't failed them—they've failed Scripture ... Their sinful neglect inevitably bears the fruit of doctrinal confusion and spiritual impotence. Because they never disciplined themselves to live according to biblical principles, they're now abandoning Scripture for worldly alternatives. They turn to psychoanalysis to solve their problems, to science to explain the origin of life, to philosophy to explain the meaning of life, and to sociology to explain why they sin. Churches, schools, and seminaries have thus made themselves vulnerable to the influence of such teachings.

... Your spiritual health depends on placing the utmost value on the Word of God and obeying it with an eager heart. If you think you can find answers to your spiritual problems through human counsel or worldly wisdom, you are forfeiting the most valuable and only reliable source of answers to the human dilemma. Don't relinquish the sweet, satisfying riches of God's Word for the bitter[ness] of this world's folly.<sup>1</sup>

We believe God's Word is truly and totally sufficient (all we need) not only for salvation, but for our spiritual life and godliness. It's one thing to say that, but do we act like we believe that? If someone found *your Bible* years from now, would they be able to tell how much you loved and read it and how dearly treasured it was to you? What about those who observe you and me now? Do we live like we believe what 2 Peter 1:4 says, that there are "precious and magnificent promises" in this book? Do our hearts resonate with what we read in Psalm 119, or does what we read sound foreign? Do we treasure it in our heart so we might not sin?

Notice the language of great emotion for this great Book (v. 139 “zeal,” v. 140b “love,” v. 143 “anguish ...delight,” v. 144b “life”). I also want you to notice why Scripture is so great in His affections – because of the great God of the Word (“right/righteous” 6x in 8 verses). Today’s text shows us the righteousness of God’s Word and our right emotional response.

<sup>137</sup> **Righteous** are You, O LORD, And **upright** are Your judgments. <sup>138</sup> You have commanded Your testimonies in **righteousness** And exceeding faithfulness. <sup>139</sup> My zeal has consumed me, Because my adversaries have forgotten Your words. <sup>140</sup> Your word is very pure, Therefore Your servant loves it. <sup>141</sup> I am small and despised, *Yet* I do not forget Your precepts. <sup>142</sup> Your **righteousness** is an everlasting **righteousness**, And Your law is truth. <sup>143</sup> Trouble and anguish have come upon me, *Yet* Your commandments are my delight. <sup>144</sup> Your testimonies are **righteous** forever; Give me understanding that I may live.

**CONTEXT:** Ps 119 was written amidst adversity and adversaries (v. 139b); v. 157 explains these persecutors and adversaries were many, and verse 161 explains that his persecutors included princes. These were not just co-workers who didn’t like his faith, they were kings and rulers who wanted to destroy him, as we saw in earlier verses. This is the context, in the presence of his enemies, that the table of God’s Word is spread as a feast for his soul, and his cup overflowed with its satisfying goodness and mercy. Vs. 143 shows he wrote not from an ivory tower, but in the furnace of trouble. Trouble as we see mentioned in v. 143, and tribulation and trials are normal for God’s people from OT Israelites to the NT church.

Acts 14:21-24 (NASB95) <sup>21</sup> After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying*, “**Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.**” <sup>23</sup> When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. <sup>24</sup> They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia.

Whatever your view of end times, you have to affirm that the N.T. does not teach the church or its believers escape all tribulation, even tremendous tribulation – in fact, quite the contrary. Jesus promised the founders of the early church “*In this world you will have tribulation.* But take heart, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Paul tells the Thessalonians they are not appointed to *suffer wrath* in 1 Thessalonians 5 (that’s the distinction), but in chapter 3 he tells them *they have been appointed or destined for affliction*:

1 Thessalonians 3:3 “so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.”

2 Timothy 3:12 “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

If you weren’t here last Sunday night you really missed out on an unforgettable testimony from pastor Naha Nayak from India, who shared firsthand of personal persecution: 52 members of his own family have been put to death in recent months by radical Hindu militants. He also read several statements of Christ to His original disciples promising them this, which comforted him as his brethren have fled for their lives all over India in their deep tribulation.

But if you heard him speak, you could tell he not only had deep anguish in his heart for his people, as v. 143 says, but he had deep love and delight in God’s Word, as verse 143 also says.

<sup>92</sup> If Your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.

Martin Luther once said he delighted in Psalm 119 so much, he would not give the whole world in exchange for one of its pages. Remember Dr. Nikol's testimony of the one page of her Bible?

One of the advantages of tribulation is it causes us to depend on and delight in God's Word more. May we deepen our love today.

<sup>141</sup> I am small and despised, *Yet* I do not forget Your precepts.

Notice the word "despised" – his enemies may despise him, but he will not deny God's Word. If this is David writing, he may have in mind how small and despised he was in his brother's eyes when God called him (his family didn't even have him around when Samuel the prophet came). David was certainly despised in the eyes of Goliath as a small boy coming with sticks and stones that the giant mocked and looked forward to feeding the little guy to the birds. David was mocked by his own brethren before, but Saul who was head and shoulders taller than the other Israelites, saw something in David, despite his appearance. There was a zeal for God's glory consuming him, and if God is within him and for him, who could be against him? God's sovereign choice is intentionally different than our world's elections and ways of doing things.

1 Corinthians 1:26-32 <sup>26</sup> For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; <sup>27</sup> but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, <sup>28</sup> and the base things of the world and **the despised God has chosen**, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> **so that no man may boast before God.** <sup>30</sup> **But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus ...**

Isaiah 53 says even our Lord Himself was "despised and rejected of men," so we're in good company if the world despises and rejects us for our lowly association with Christ, who came lowly and humbly, riding on a donkey. Before God we truly are small, but:

Isaiah 41:14 "Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel; I will help you," declares the Lord, "and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel."

When God calls the tribe of Israel "you worm," that's not a flattering self-image-boosting term in any language. What could be more small or despised than a worm to most men? But God tells them "fear not" – and He doesn't then say, "*you can do it.*" He says "*I will help you.*" The comfort is not in what a great worm *we are*, but it's trusting in *what a great God we have* who promises to help us in grace, and be with us lowly ones, despised by the world.

The Apostle Paul did not mind being small and despised. He called himself least of the saints, least of the Apostles and not worthy, the lowest of the low -- but ... he was a servant of the Most High God. That is where his significance and purpose was found. Apart from Christ, we are nothing and can do nothing, but with Him, in Him, we can bear fruit that remains. If God is for us who can be against?

*Notice in this text the several terms for the righteousness of God's Word and also several terms for the right emotions we should have in response to God's Word.*

### **1. God's Word is Absolutely Righteous**

<sup>137</sup> Righteous are You, O LORD, And upright are Your judgments.

Another word for “righteous” would be just. The just and righteous character of God causes all of His judgments and Words that flow out from Him to be consistent with that nature. God is the absolute standard of what is right and wrong, which is part of what this Heb. word emphasizes and is part of the reason why our world does not like the righteousness of God but wants to establish its own (Rom. 10:3). Sinners don’t want the Ten Commandments in public places or courts of law because if God’s moral standard is chiseled in stone in plain sight, they’re condemned before the court is even in session! They are guilty before God’s Supreme Court.

Ever since the days of Cain in Genesis 4, sinners like Cain have been complaining that they think God is too harsh, that His judgments are more than they can bear. But the godly say with Abraham in Genesis 18 “shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” The rhetorical obvious answer to all believers is: “Yes, God is a righteous judge who always does and says what is right!”

Psalms 145:17 The LORD is **righteous in all His ways** ...

Deuteronomy 32:4 “... **all His ways are just**; A God of faithfulness and **without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.**

Ezekiel 18:29 (ESV) Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ [*or “not right” NASB, or “not fair” NKJV*] O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?

Even Pharaoh had to admit in Exodus 9:27: “I have sinned ... **the LORD is the righteous one**, and I and my people are **the wicked ones.**”

Romans 9<sup>10</sup> And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived *twins* by one man, our father Isaac;<sup>11</sup> for though *the twins* were not yet born [*womb-mates*] and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to *His* choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,<sup>12</sup> it was said to her, “THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER.”<sup>13</sup> Just as it is written, “JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED.”<sup>14</sup> What shall we say then? **There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!**

God is sovereign in His choices. Who are we to talk back to God, it goes on to say? Can the clay tell the potter what is right? Unthinkable – and it’s unthinkable that God is ever unjust.

If you understand the Bible teaches we don’t deserve anything from God (besides death physically and eternally, which is the wages of sin), you won’t pull out the “that’s not fair” card. Fair would be hell – you don’t want what’s fair! Any good we have is a *grace* to be thankful for, and even the things we don’t consider good (afflictions and trials) are not evidence that God is *unfaithful*, they actually prove He *is faithful* and just and right and good to us:

Look at Ps 119:75: “I know, O Lord, that Your judgments are righteous, And that **in faithfulness You have afflicted me**”

## **2. God’s Word is Absolutely Faithful**

<sup>138</sup> You have commanded Your testimonies in righteousness And exceeding faithfulness.

On that last phrase, one translation has “fully trustworthy” (NIV). Another has “absolutely reliable” (NET). You can bank on the righteous faithfulness of God and His Word all the time, forever.

<sup>144</sup>Your testimonies are **righteous** forever ...

Albert Barnes wrote: ‘Human governments change. Old dynasties pass away. New laws are enacted under new administrations. Customs change. Opinions change. People change. The world changes. But as God himself never changes, so it is with his law. That law is founded on eternal truth, and can never change.’

### **3. God’s Word is Absolutely Pure**

<sup>140</sup>Your word is very pure, Therefore Your servant loves it.

“very pure” – other translations have “well-trying” (ESV) or “thoroughly tested” (NLT). Literally, it’s *refined*. Again this psalm uses the imagery of gold in referring to the nature and value of God’s Word. This word “pure” refers to the purifying process of a refiner, who heats metal, takes away the dross, and what’s left with a pure substance, like in Proverbs 25:4. This word is not enough, though, he adds the modifier “very” – *very* pure, or “completely pure” (NET), absolutely pure. We could say “purer than pure.”

R. C. Sproul sums it up this way: ‘There is no dross in it; there is no error in it; it is pure and undefiled. Everything else, all of the counsel, all of the insight, all of the opinions of men that I have ever examined are flawed. There is not that sterling quality of essential purity ... “Purity” is a word that has all but disappeared from our language. Where are today’s Puritans who want the pure gospel, the pure truth, the pure life of obedience? Where are those who seek the favor of God above all other considerations?’<sup>2</sup>

God’s Word is more precious and pure than gold to his soul. Verse 127 also presents vividly the supreme value of God’s Word, which he says he loves far beyond any gold or riches in this world. He uses a term there for fine gold or unalloyed gold. His commitment to God’s truth is more intense than man’s desire for the purest forms of earth’s most precious metal. If the love of earthly riches and money is the root of all evil, all kinds of evil, then the love of the true and eternal riches of Scripture is the root of all good. He is committed to hold onto the Word which is far more valuable than gold, even while others around him grasp for wood, hay, stubble.

Proverbs 3:14-15 says of the wisdom in God’s Word: “her profit is better than the profit of silver And her gain **better than fine gold**. She is more precious than jewels; And nothing you desire compares with her.”

8:11 “... better than jewels; And **all desirable things cannot compare**”

16:16 “**How much better it is to get wisdom than gold!**”

### **4. God’s Word is Absolute Truth**

<sup>142</sup>Your **righteousness** is an everlasting **righteousness**, And Your law is **truth**.

God’s Word is absolutely and eternally true. It was true long before you existed and remains true even if you never believe it. Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “what is truth?” Unbelievers today ask the question, but many post-modernists aren’t even sure there is an answer to that question that can be true for everyone.

- Our world believes truth has become obsolete, but the Bible teaches God’s truth is absolute, abiding forever.
- The world says truth is relative, but biblical truth is objective.

- Our world says truth is within us, the Bible says it's in here.
- Our world says truth is created, biblical truth is discovered.
- Our world says something becomes truth when we believe it, biblical truth is true regardless of whether you believe it
- Our world says there are many truths (even conflicting truths can be true for you, but not for me) but Jesus said when it comes to heaven, "I am the way, **the truth**, and the life..."

*The righteousness of God's Word is shown by many terms – it's absolutely righteous, faithful, pure and absolute truth. In closing, let's look at the terms for the right response of our emotions. We do not trust or rely on feelings, but godly emotions are important*

### **Application # 1. We should be zealous**

<sup>139</sup> My zeal has consumed me Because my adversaries have forgotten Your word

This is true godly zeal, not the zeal of his ungodly enemies. Many have a misplaced zeal. Paul could speak of Jewish adversaries in his day who had great zeal even in religion, but not according to knowledge. They're devoted to Judaism but they do not know in a saving way the God of Abraham if they reject God's Son. There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.

As you look at all the different religions in the world, people will say, "Yes, but they're good people and so sincere." But you see, God's Word teaches many are sincere and *sincerely wrong*. There is no one truly good in God's eyes, no not one. Only God is truly good, Jesus told a man who asked what good things he must do to get to heaven. The Bible teaches only those who are covered by the perfect righteousness of Christ as their Lord can be pleasing to a Holy God and accepted in His Kingdom of heaven.

Non-believers will say to Christians, "Don't be so narrow-minded. Don't you realize there are many different roads, and they all lead to the same place?" And you can answer them: "Yes, I actually do realize that, and we believe that, too, actually. There *are* hundreds and thousands of roads and ways leading to the same place, *but that place is destruction!* Broad is the road, Jesus taught, and virtually everyone is on it, going the way of their religion, but narrow is the one road to eternal life, in the opposite direction, and few find it." Jesus Himself said "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man gets to the Father but through me." 1 Timothy 2 says there is One Mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus.

It's not Jesus plus the saints, plus the sacraments, plus any self-righteous works you do. If you are trusting at all in anything you or any other human does to get you to heaven, you are not truly trusting in Christ's finished work as sufficient to save, and you are not by biblical definition truly trusting in Christ or truly in Christ. Many are zealous in religion, but do not have a saving relationship with Christ.

Your coworkers and friends may say "that's narrow and arrogant and unloving." Well, it *would be* arrogant if we were claiming *our* authority or that something is true *because we* say it. But Jesus said it, not us. God determines eternity, not us, and it would actually be *very* arrogant for us to think we determine eternity, not God. God needs to bow to what we say?! What heights of arrogance!

As for the charge of being narrow, Jesus Himself did use the word “narrow.” But He also used the words “whosoever believes” – so you can tell people that the road is not too narrow for them if they believe. If God is right and false religion is not, it’s actually the most loving thing to do to warn people about to perish of the only escape. It’s the most loving thing we can do as our world goes down like the Titanic, to tell people there is a lifeboat available to them in Jesus Christ, there is an ark to save them from the floods of God’s wrath, an analogy Peter makes of the Second Coming. We need to be more zealous for the lost, as we ended last week.

Jesus fulfilled Psalm 69:9 “*zeal for Your house has consumed me.*” Jesus had compassion on sinful Israelites who were like sheep without a shepherd, but when it came to the zealots of Pharisee religion, the false shepherd and false teachers, and those who had corrupted God’s house. Zeal consumed him, and He sent tables flying and drove them away from the house of God with a whip. Jesus was no wimp – His meekness was not weakness but strength under control. His righteous indignation and holy zeal consumed Him with godly anger on the right occasions for the right reasons.

Man’s only hope to escape God’s zealous consuming wrath is to trust in Christ and His death on the cross, receiving the wrath you deserve. Don’t trust in your works, trust in the work of Christ for sinners at Calvary and His resurrection and that He alone is your Mediator at the Father’s right hand. Repent of your sins, and pray that God would enthrone Himself as Lord in your heart, and dethrone yourself from there.

A word to those who already saved: Surrender even more and seek Christlikeness more. We’re commanded to be zealous for God’s glory. In Revelation 3:19 Jesus commands “Be zealous therefore, and repent.” We need to repent for our lack of zeal and earnestness, for our spiritual lukewarmness and lackadaisicality.

2 Corinthians 7:10-11 speaks about the godly repentance of salvation, and the marks of true repentance there include “earnestness ... indignation ... longing ... zeal.” Some of the other translations include the words “eagerness ... alarm” (NIV) “deep concern” (NET), “diligence ... vehement desire” (NKJV).

### **Application # 2. We should be in love with God’s Word**

That may sound a little weird, to be in love with a book, but remember that it is the God behind the Word who we ultimately are to love and therefore love all that He says to us in this Book. Like the light of the star that led the wise men to Christ, His Word is a light to our way and path, leading us to Christ Himself.

<sup>140</sup>Your word is very pure, Therefore Your servant loves it.

It is purer than gold, and its riches dwell richly within us as we love it more and more.

Colossians 3 <sup>16</sup>Let the word of Christ **richly dwell within you**, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, **singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.** <sup>17</sup>Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, **giving thanks through Him to God the Father.**

One way we know it's richly dwelling in us is if we're thankful in our hearts to God, and thankful in our speech and deeds (mentioned 2x in 2 verses).

**Application #3: We should be delighting in God's commands**

<sup>143</sup>Trouble and anguish have come upon me, *Yet* Your commandments are my delight.<sup>144</sup> Your testimonies are **righteous** forever; Give me understanding that I may live.

Moses said to Israel that God's commands were to be their life. Every believer has verses they take special comfort or delight in, especially God's promises, but the end of v. 143 emphasizes love and delight for the commands of God's law in particular.

v. 35 Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it.

v. 47-48 I shall delight in Your commandments, Which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, Which I love; And I will meditate ...

We've discussed before how meditation and delight go together, as the whole book of Psalms begins with the man whose "delight is in the *law* of the Lord [not just promises] and on His law he meditates

At the end of our text today, where he is at the end of himself with great trouble and anguish, in v. 143 he does not deny God's Word, he is determined to delight in it more. May it be the same for us.

Notice in v. 144 how he prays while in trouble, which is also a great pattern for us: "Give me understanding, and I shall live." I hope your prayer life is not just prayers for God to change your circumstances so you can live more the way you desire, but that you pray for God to give you understanding from His Word as you read it, so that you can live the way God desires.

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur. *Our Sufficiency in Christ*. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Sproul, *R.C. Sproul's chapters from symposium volumes* (electronic ed.). Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000.