

## Psalm 119 (Part One)

Variations on a Theme

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My favorite classes in high school were history and literature. Out of those two my senior English class stands out in particular. That was the very best—the pinnacle—because I had the opportunity to learn English Literature from a teacher who really knew his subject. He made it challenging and fun.

Here we were a bunch of 17 and 18 year old kids, and you know, English can seem to be boring. Who wants to read all those old pieces of prose and poetry when you could be doing something else more important? He had a way of coming across to kids of that age, coming up with little assignments that were really intriguing. We got a kick out of it, and enjoyed doing them.

For example, one of his tests, I believe it was the mid-term of our first semester, was an essay or story that we had to write, gathering together five or six characters from the various stories and books that we had read already over the first couple of months of class, putting them into one place in one room in our story, and have them debate one of the themes that the various pieces prose and poetry had mentioned.

So we had to debate within this essay assignment—it might be like Beowulf debating a daughter of King Lear on the subject of women's rights. It was neat because you had to keep the characters in character. They could not suddenly have 20<sup>th</sup> century ideas. Like Beowulf, they had to have their own century's ideas of women's rights, and then make these characters debate back and forth on these things.

So, that was fun, and it really made you think. I liked it. It got me going.

Most of you probably do not remember your high school English classes with fondness. I suppose most of you soldiered through, and got your "B" for the semester, and thought you had done pretty well. You were not going to go on to become an English major. So, whatever you got was fine. But, there were probably parts of your English class that you really did not like. You probably hated it (to put it nicely). And, probably that section was the poetry. For other people, it might have been Shakespeare. But then, Shakespeare is all about poetry. I realize that some of the poetry, especially modern poetry, is difficult to understand and interpret. It is not the way we talk, or think; they use odd words; their word order is strange; it is hard to grasp, sometimes.

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Now this hatred and/or misunderstanding of poetry really apply not to the short two or three stanza-type Lord Byron poems, but to the “epic” poetry. These are the ones that just go on and on, page after page. There is supposed to be a story there, but you have no idea what it is. You have to read all the footnotes, and get your Cliffs Notes, you have to get help from your teacher; you finally figure out that Beowulf has killed a dragon.

Another one might be, “Hiawatha,” by Longfellow. (That one is about Native American Indians, by the way.) Yet another one might be Tennyson’s “Idols of the Kings.” I had some friends in Lexington High School in Columbia that would tell me about one week after week when we would have our discussions after Sabbath services. I got the whole story. I did not have to read the book. Besides Beowulf, it might have been Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales that got your mind spinning in ways that you did not like. And, of course, there are Shakespeare’s plays.

These poems came out of Old English, Middle English, or very early Modern English, which have almost no comparison to today’s English, and it is really difficult to read and understand. People just do not talk that way with all the thee’s, and thou’s, and the various endings that are now obsolete. They can be confusing.

Now, when it comes to poetry, we Americans are at a disadvantage because we are not a culture that values poetry very much anymore. Other cultures do. The only place that we seem to value poetry is in popular music lyrics.

Most of us have no trouble listening to the radio—if you can understand what they are actually saying, you can figure out what the story is within the lyrics—they are not hard to understand, because the poet has not only put the words there in a way that we can grasp, because it is in modern lingo, but there is music there, too, to break it down for us, and put the emotion there too. So, understanding that kind of poetry is simple as pie. We understand that “She done me wrong,” and that “He’s gonna go off and drive his truck.”

Other cultures, usually the less scientifically advanced ones, have us beat when it comes to poetry. These cultures have transmitted a great deal of their history and their culture orally. The young in those cultures are expected to memorize long stories, usually some sort of mythology of their people; or maybe national songs, folk songs, or dance songs that are part of their culture. Or even like the Hebrews who expected their children to memorize genealogies, because this also had the history of their people. It is important in the way that the culture lived that you knew who your father is, and your grandfather, your great-grandfather, and that you could go back to your clan identity,

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and your tribal identity, having all that set down. The children were expected to know who their forefathers were.

It was easier to memorize these songs, stories, and genealogies if they were in poetic form, especially the ones set to music.

So, in these cultures poetry is less an art form, than it is a well-honed tool for teaching what needed to be learned, and passing it onto the next generation with an economy of words. So you do not have these long complex things to memorize, but they would put them into poetry which tends to be simpler in the manner of using words. So the poetic forms in these cultures would add a dimension that somebody who comes from a different culture might not understand.

And that is what happens when we try to understand Hebrew poetry.

We are not Hebrews. Well, we might be Israelites genetically, but not culturally. We do not have those understandings of the poetic forms that the Hebrews of Bible times had. They might see a copy of the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) and see much more in them than we do today. They were used to it. It was part of their culture, and everyday life. Hebrew poetry contains elements an oral culture.

So, it pays us, as Christians who read the Old Testament a lot, to understand a bit about Hebrew poetry since the Bible is chock full of it. There is a lot of poetry in there. If you have a modern Bible that separates things out into (poetry) verse form, and you just go flipping through the Bible, you will see that modern translators have put a lot of the Bible into verse form, whereas the King James Version did not. They just ran them straight through.

Think of the large portions of Scripture that were originally in verse form: Obviously, there are the Psalms. The Psalms are always in verse form. And most of Proverbs are in verse form. But, you also have Job, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations, and large parts of each of the Major and Minor Prophets, as well as portions of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, and even portions of the other historical books. So, there is verse everywhere in the Bible. You cannot go far without running across some sort of Hebrew verse in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, some say that poetry first appears in Genesis.

“And Adam said:

‘This is now bone of my bones

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And flesh of my flesh;  
She shall be called Woman,  
Because she was taken out of Man.”

This verse may be the first poetry uttered, and this was Adam’s first day. Others say that it was not poetry, but that it was just the way that it came out. The first poetry is found in Genesis 4 by Lamech,

Then Lamech said to his wives:  
"Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;  
Wives of Lamech, listen to my speech!  
For I have killed a man for wounding me,  
Even a young man for hurting me.  
If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold,  
Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold."

The reason others think that this is the first poetry is because of its parallelism.

This brings me to my next point.

Traditional English poetry, the stuff we are used to, is known for its verse form; for meter and rhythm; for rhyming; and alliteration, and assonance—where either the vowels or consonants sounds repeat. Here is an example; I am going to read to you the first stanza of Lord Byron’s “Destruction of Senacharib,” which is my favorite poem. It will give you an idea of English poetry. It has the rhyme, the meter and rhythm, and then the verse form, as well as alliteration and assonance:

“The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,  
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold.

And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,

When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

You can hear the rhyme, the assonance; you know that this is a verse, and that there is a rhythm there you can feel; you can almost feel the army coming down toward Jerusalem. This is English poetry.

However, when we turn to biblical poetry, we do not see much of this at all. This is not how Hebrew poetry works. Hebrew is an inherently rhyming language, because it has word endings and other grammar forms that are the same, a lot like Spanish. As you know, a lot of the Spanish words end the same, or they have various other parts to them that make it a naturally rhyming language. You may be saying something in conversation, but you are rhyming by saying a natural sentence. That is how Hebrew is too.

But, there is very little formal rhyme, or meter, or rhythm in Hebrew poetry, which to us makes it not sound like poetry at all. Our English ears need formal rhyme, meter, and rhythm to recognize something as poetry.

Of course, we are reading these poems translated from Hebrew into English so we really cannot see what they were like in Hebrew. Even if we hear them by somebody speaking in Hebrew, we may hear a little bit of rhythm, and hear a bit of rhyme, but of course, we do not know Hebrew, so we do not know what it all means.

One expert on Hebrew poetry wrote, "The rhythms in Hebrew poetry are manifold; the symmetry and variation being determined by emotion and sentiment."

What he means is that how a verse sounds to the ear is not important to a Hebrew speaker, because the rhythms and symmetry were not in how things sounded, but in what they meant, and what emotional impact they had upon the hearer.

Let me try to explain it this way because it is a concept that is foreign to us. We think of poetry in terms of sound and rhythm and things, but the Hebrews thought of it in a much deeper intellectual and emotional way that we do. The chief characteristic of Hebrew poetry is repetition, and normally when we hear it being talked about, or we read it in a commentary, they call it parallelism. Parallelism is a form of repetition.

Hebrew parallelism is the equivalent to English rhyme. To make it simple, when we look for rhyme, they look for parallelism for their repetition. In fact, parallelism in Hebrew poetry has been called, “Logical Rhythm.” Logical in terms of rational, or mental statement.

The Logos is a saying, as it were.

So, these sayings—what the thoughts are, what the ideas are—are the “rhyme” that Hebrew poets try to make. That is, it is a rhyming of ideas. Not the rhyming of sounds or words, but a rhyming of ideas.

What we can see from this is that the Hebrew mind loves word play. They liked making puns, and making comparisons. They liked to stack synonyms. They could come up with a whole list, like a mini-thesaurus on one word. They loved to make a parallelism by using another word that is very similar and then maybe they would add two or three more.

Another thing they liked to do, on the other hand, was opposing it with antonyms; parallel in terms of its opposite.

See the word play they liked to do in their minds? They loved to make comparisons. “This is like that.” Sometimes the comparisons seem strange to us, but we live in a whole different culture, and that is why we need to have people telling us what these things are in commentaries because we do not get it. They also liked to repeat things to build up intensity. The simplest way I can think to show this is their use of “Holy of Holies.” What we would use would be “Holiest of All.” But, they stacked the two words together, “holy, holy,” so we know that this was doubly holy. This applies also to the, “Song of Songs,” which means the, “best song.” And, there are several others of these sorts of things throughout the Bible. So they stack words one on top of another to increase the intensity.

They will also do things like showing cause and effect, as well as various other things.

This all is poetry to them; not our simple rhymes and rhythms. They dealt in whole ideas. To the Hebrews, the art was in the effect upon the mind. The, “Ah ha!” The “gotcha.” The, “Oh, that was a neat turn of phrase!” “Now I get it!” This is the sort of thing that they believed was really neat. It was really poetic when the writer was able to take something that may have been obscure and add something that clarified it. Or add something to it that showed the opposite. Or add something to it that made it even more intense and exciting; not necessarily the tricky little rhyming things that we do.

I need to show you Deuteronomy 6:7 because we could say that this verse gives us the foundation of Hebrew poetry. This passage is right after the shamah, “Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One,” and then God tells us to teach these things to our children.

**Deuteronomy 6:6-7** "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

Notice what was done, here. The instruction is: 1) internalize it to be in your heart, 2) and then you shall teach them diligently.

You have probably heard this before, but this phrase, “Teach them diligently,” implies repetition, because the word diligently is one of those word pictures that implies and suggests “sharpening, or a grinding of a blade.” You know put a blade on a whetstone, and you turn the stone, and you grind the blade down make an edge on it. What Moses is talking about here is teaching—using the illustration of honing a blade repeatedly until it is sharp as a razor. Then, he shows in this very verse what he means.

So what we have here is that not only are you to teach them one time, but you are to teach them and talk of them when you sit in your house, or while you are walking by the way (another time), and when you lie down (again, another time), and when you rise up (yet another time).

We see, here, that he has shown us four different times that we are to be repeating this teaching to our children. God is showing that the way He teaches us is by repetition. If He tells us to teach our children diligently, sharpen them repeatedly by honing them, it is a reflection of what He does to us. He does not tell us to do anything that He does not do Himself. He does this because He wants us to remember. So what He does, He teaches us something; He puts it down in His Word, and then He teaches it again, but in a slightly different way. He then teaches us again, and He puts it in a different way altogether. Then He shows us the opposite. He intensifies it with something that is really influential to our minds so that it will affect us. And then He does it another way. He keeps coming back, repeating, repeating, and repeating.

What does He do every year? We must do the seven holy days every year, over and over again.

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Let us take a few minutes to see several kinds of parallelisms in God's Word. First, please turn to Psalm 83. This particular parallelism is a perfectly synonymous one.

**Psalm 83:1** Do not keep silent, O God! Do not hold Your peace, and do not be still, O God!

Now, this one is in triplicate! He says the same thing three times in one verse. Do not keep silent, do not hold your peace, and do not be still. This is a perfectly synonymous parallelism.

Secondly, go back to Psalm 24 where we find another parallelism, but it is imperfectly synonymous. This means that one of the elements is left out.

**Psalm 24:2** For He has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the waters.

The two clauses are closely related in meaning—founded it upon the seas; and established it upon the waters. But he left out one small element, which is "He." Though "He" is understood, it is an imperfectly synonymous parallelism. The composer could have made it perfect by adding He to the second clause.

The third example is found in Psalm 19. This one is a similar parallelism.

**Psalm 19:2** Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge.

Now we have a similarity of ideas, but day is not synonymous with night. Utters is not synonymous with reveals. Speech is not synonymous with knowledge. There is some linking there—you can see why they go together—but, these two thoughts are only similar.

But, because of these differences that we see here, we see an expansion of the underlying idea. We go from day into night. So now we are talking about the full day—all of time. We go from utter to reveals, which means that it is not only through spoken words, but there are also other ways this is revealed. Then we go from spoken ideas to knowledge. Not all knowledge comes through speech. So, here we have an expansion through a similar parallelism, rather than sticking to something that was synonymous.

Turn to Proverbs 10. This is one that we are very familiar with. The Proverbs are full of these; hundreds of antithetic parallels (meaning that they are opposites):

**Proverb 10:1** A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is the grief of his mother.

So, we have wise versus foolish; glad versus grief; and father versus mother. We see how it is antithetical, and we learn a great deal. You could probably flip any page, and blindly put your finger down, and find one of these in the book of Proverbs, because most of the Proverbs follow this line.

**Proverbs 10:2** Treasures of wickedness profit nothing, but righteousness delivers from death.

These are antithetic, or opposite parallels.

Turning back to the Psalms, we will glance at a fifth one—David's psalm of repentance. This type of parallelism is called "chiastic," which means inverted.

**Psalm 51:1** Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.

What this one did, which I think is kind of neat, is the sentence runs out one way, and then retraces its steps back to the beginning. It is like one of those party favors where you blow it and the end unfolds out, and then you stop, and it returns to you.

We have, here, "Have mercy on me," which is the first element, and then we have, "blot out my transgressions," which is similar in thought, and it is the last element. In the middle we have the two "according to Your loving kindness," and "according to the multitude of Your tender mercies." So it goes out, and then it comes back in like a wave of the tide.

**Proverbs 16:25** There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.

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If you think about it, this one is pretty obvious. This sixth one is a cause and effect parallel. They are easy to spot. The cause is a man going on his own way, which seems right to him, but the effect that in the end, he is going to die.

There is another one just across the page in 17:13:

**Proverbs 17:13** Whoever rewards evil for good, evil will not depart from his house.

So if you do something bad to someone who did something good to you, well, the curse is that you are going to have to suffer evil. This is what happened to David, regarding Bathsheba and Uriah. David rewarded good with evil, and it did not depart from his house.

**Proverbs 4:23** Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life.

Now, this one (number seven) is a “statement and reason” parallelism. This is slightly different from cause and effect. The way this is identified is because you can insert the question, “why?” between the two clauses. “Keep your heart with all diligence”—why?—“for out of it spring the issues of life.” So we have the statement command, and then the reason why you should do that; out of your heart springs those issues that you have to deal with, and you might as well deal with them in a good way, rather than a bad way. So, keep your heart.

Please turn to Psalm 29 for the eighth example.

**Psalm 29:1-2** Give unto the LORD, O you mighty ones, give unto the LORD glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due to His name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.

This one is a climactic parallelism. We could have either done the one verse, or the other verse, but I chose to do both verses, because it is not only climactic in the one verse, but it goes on to the next verse, and extends the climax until you get to the worship of the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

What happens in the climactic parallelism is that each additional line adds intensity. In

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fact, we could go through this entire psalm, because it is a series of climactic parallels. From verse 3 onward, it uses the voice of the Lord as the climactic phrase. The voice of the Lord does this, and the voice of the Lord does that, and the voice of the Lord does this other thing, etc. So, by the time that you get to the end of the psalm, you are convinced that God is invincible, and sovereign. Since He is on our side, He is able to give us true peace, and protect us. We should be content.

So this ratcheting up, this climactic parallelism helps to push that thought: “What do you have to worry about? Look at what God is!” Of course, it starts off with giving unto God. Why do we give unto God? Because He is all of these things to us!

Please turn to Nahum. This ninth one is probably of the most uncommon type that I have here. It is a palilogical parallelism. What this does is that it repeats a word or phrase like an echo to make it more powerful. It is very similar to the climactic, but this is a repeating to make it more powerful.

**Nahum 1:2** God is jealous, and the LOORD avenges; the LOORD avenges and is furious. The LOORD will take vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies.

This one keys in on the word “avenges.” This is also translated, “takes vengeance.” So, we have a repetition—there is an echo—of this idea of God taking vengeance. By the time you get to the end of the verse, you understand that God is hopping mad, and He is going to act. He is ready to take vengeance. That is what this one does—this one builds intensity by echoing the same word or phrase over and over again so that we get the point.

Now, this final one is found back in Proverbs 15. This is two of the same kind of parallelism I found in consecutive verses. This is the comparison parallelism.

**Proverbs 15:16-17** Better is a little with the fear of the LOORD, than great treasure with trouble. Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted calf with hatred.

The composer is making comparisons, here, that we should be able to understand very easily. What it does, though, is it gives us the proper perspective on things—God’s perspective on things. It is better not to be wealthy, and to have the fear of the Lord, than it is to have all sorts of problems even though you are rich. Of course, most of us

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wish we were rich, and also did not have all the problems, but we are in the situation where we are, where we struggle to get by. If we are happy, and we do not have a lot of problems, then that is a good thing.

That is just a smattering of the parallelisms that I found for you. There are at least 15 kinds, and probably more. But, I thought these are the ones that we would probably run across the most. These are the types of things that the Hebrews thought were really artful and neat. That is why they used them.

We do not need to memorize these. Just being familiar with them is enough. Just be aware that the Hebrew writers employ a very broad array of poetic devices like this to get their points across. In this way, then, they can state whatever idea they are trying to get across in multiple forms. They might be saying the same things, trying to get across the same points, but they can do it in so many different ways by using these various forms of parallelism.

Then, as they are doing it, they expand on their ideas, because they bring in comparisons; opposites; they intensify things; they make them more climactic; and they add echoes. We can really learn a lot from this form.

There is no better example of this hammering away at one point by using multiple devices than Psalm 119, which is where we are headed today.

We know that in my last two sermons, we have done the Songs of Ascents, which are the ones immediately after Psalm 119; and we have done the Hallel, which are the seven Psalms right before Psalm 119. So I have decided to do Psalm 119 also so that we will have covered the bulk of Book V of the Psalms.

So now, we are going to begin a look at this long meditation on God's law, and His way of life. We will find that it is fitting instruction after the Psalms of Praise for Redemption—the theme of the Hallel—and before the spiritual life lessons that we find in the Psalms of Ascents.

If you will remember about the Psalms of Ascents, they talked about groups of three in the Songs of Ascents where you had some sort of trial or tribulation in the first three, followed by faith in God in the second three, and then you had praise for God in the last section.

So, the meditation on God's law—God's Word (which may be a better way of talking about it rather than strictly God's law)—is a good center for the types of instruction that

we got from those other two sermons.

We will not get to Psalm 119 in terms of actually going into it, and dissecting what it all means today. The remainder of today's sermon will be to give you some information on Psalm 119 that you need to know before you get started. It is a truly wonderful piece of literature of God's Word, and most of us just do not get enough out of it. I plan on doing two more sermons after this on Psalm 119, and I think it will go well with the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Psalm 119 is unique to Scripture. It is the longest psalm. It is the longest chapter in the entire Bible. It has 176 verses (which is why we are not going to go over all of it today). In my Bible, which is a Nelson New King James Version, double column, wide margin, center reference Bible, it covers 11 columns, or five and a half pages. That is a lot!

By the way, just for your information, the shortest chapter in the Bible is just before it in Psalm 117, with only two verses. We looked at that in the sermon on the Hallel. Did you know that the center of the Bible is in Psalm 118? I believe that it is the middle two verses, 8 and 9, which tell us that "it is better to trust the Lord, than to put your confidence in man; it is better to trust in the Lord, than to put your confidence in princes."

And immediately after that, you have this great exposition of God's way of life.

So, all these little things (it is kind of neat) come together at one spot. I am not sure that it means anything more special, but it is really neat that the shortest and the longest with these themes are at the very center of Scripture. It is quite intriguing.

In form, Psalm 119 is a perfect expanded acrostic. This means that it is organized by the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It is the equivalent to the Greek, "Alpha and Omega," and our English, "A to Z."

It is an expanded acrostic because each letter of the alphabet gets 8 verses to comment on a variation of the theme. That is basically what Psalm 119 is. So you have eight verses for 22 letters of their alphabet, which gives you the 176 verses. It is perfect. There is not one verse that does not go with the acrostic theme. That is why it is perfect. It is exactly 8 times 22 letters.

The way that it works in Hebrew (it is almost impossible to do in English and keep the A, B, C, D type of order), is that the first 8 verses begin with words that begin with the letter "aleph." The opening word begins with a word that begins with aleph.

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And then in verses 9 through 16 (the next 8 verses) all the verses begin with the letter “beth.” And then, verses 17 through 24 begin with “gimel.” And it continues through the Hebrew alphabet unto the end.

It is a shame that we cannot see this in English, but it does not work in English. Some have tried to translate it that way, but the translation is very stilted, and when you get into certain letters, it really becomes difficult.

Now, there are other acrostic chapters, or parts of chapters in the Bible, all of which are in the Old Testament, and they are for your information: Psalm 25; Psalm 34; Psalm 37; Psalm 111; Psalm 112; Psalm 119; and Psalm 145; the virtuous woman found in Proverbs 31:10-31 is also acrostic. Also, you have the first four chapters of Lamentations, which make twelve acrostic chapters in all. Lamentations 4 is of special note, because it is the closest that comes to Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is constructed in verses of 8 per letter, while Lamentations 4 is constructed in verses of 3 per letter, hence 66 verses. So, every third verse begins with the next letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

Psalm 119 is the most extensive, and the most complex. Each 8 verse section or stanza is held together with its own theme. So, you have 22 themes under the main theme of God’s law, or God’s Word, and you can often find the theme of the particular section in the first verse of each section. It is not always the case, but it is a good rule of thumb that within the first verse or two you can figure out what the theme of the stanza is going to be about.

You can see that in verse 1:

**Psalm 119:1** ALEPH. Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LOORD!

That is the theme of the first section. And, it is basically a good theme verse for the entire psalm.

Now I want to enter some speculation.

Who wrote this? We notice at the top of Psalm 119 that there is no superscription about who wrote it. Several of the others will say a Psalm of David, or a Psalm of Korah, or a Psalm of Solomon, or Moses, or the sons of Asaph; but this one does not say anything.

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So we might like to do some guessing. Traditionally, it has been ascribed to David and that is mostly because it is very similar to Psalm 19:7-11, which is another exposition of how much David loved God's law. Some have also looked into the details of Psalm 119, and they see some illusions to David's life—some of the circumstances and events of his life—and they think that it might fit, that David would be the author.

Modern critical scholars, though, they always tend to be real downers regarding traditional understanding. They tend to place it after the return from exile in Babylon, saying that some anonymous priest, or Levite, or somebody, wrote or compiled it from various fragments of older writings of kings, or priests; some say that Ezra had a hand in it in either editing it, or compiling it.

But, we do not know. When it comes down to it, we just have to guess and David seems like a pretty likely candidate.

Now, let us go into it just a bit so we can see some of the internal evidence that might help us decide who did it.

From the internal evidence the psalmist must have been a person of notoriety. Turn to verse 23 where it says,

**Psalm 119:23a** Princes also sit and speak against me . . .

And notice verse 46,

**Psalm 119:46** I will speak of Your testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed.

So, this was a person of some note, because he was opposed by some princes, and he also speaks before kings. By the way, the word "princes" in verse 23 can refer to both Gentile rulers, or to Israelite rulers, and tribal leaders. So, it could be either. In verse 161 it says something very similar,

**Psalm 119:161a** Princes persecute me without a cause . . .

So, this person was someone who traveled in royal circles, or at least the aristocracy of the nation.

Interestingly though, in Psalm 119 there are no references to a temple, tabernacle, sacrifices, or a priesthood. It is very interesting that the way the circumstances—the milieu—or whatever, of this entire psalm seems to be in the court of kings, or someone who has free access to royalty, and the centers of power, but not necessarily interaction with the priesthood, or the Temple. So, that might work for David (being the author).

There is a cast of characters in Psalm 119. We normally do not think of it that way, but there are various ones who pop up. Obviously God is one of the characters because just about every verse is addressed to Him. The psalmist, of course, is the one doing the addressing, so he is also part of the cast of characters. There are a couple of mentions, more than I will show you today, of a remnant of godly people, which is interesting.

**Psalm 119:63** I am a companion of all who fear You, and of those who keep Your precepts.

So he was friends with, companions with, he fellowshipped with a group of people who try to keep God's law, and to fear Him.

**Psalm 119:74** Those who fear You will be glad when they see me, because I have hoped in Your word.

Now, this also brings up a small point: there was a time when he was separated from them, and he is saying, "When they finally get me back into their arms, they're going to be very happy that I'm there."

Also among this cast of characters are the ungodly people who despise him.

**Psalm 119:141** I am small and despised, yet I do not forget Your precepts.

They also persecute him.

**Psalm 119:84-85** How many are the days of Your servant? When will You execute judgment on those who persecute me? The proud have dug pits for me, which is not according to Your law.

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They want to destroy him.

**Psalm 119:95** The wicked wait for me to destroy me, but I will consider Your testimonies.

He says, “While they think to destroy me, I will continue to meditate on Your law.”

The psalmist refers to them as the proud (verse 85), as well as verse 51:

**Psalm 119:51** The proud have me in great derision, yet I do not turn aside from Your law.

So we see that he was derided by these proud people. What we come to understand about them is that these are people who have been born into the covenant, but do not value the spiritual riches of their relationship with God. They disdain the law, and they openly disobey it.

**Psalm 119:21** You rebuke the proud—the cursed, who stray from Your commandments.

**Psalm 119:53** Indignation has taken hold of me because of the wicked, who forsake Your law.

You do not forsake something unless you have been originally doing it, and so it shows that these people have turned from God’s way.

Another thing we see in verses 50 and 51 is the author suffers greatly from these false accusations, and he says:

**Psalm 119:50-51** This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life. The proud have me in great derision, yet I do not turn aside from Your law.

So this was a man who is under great distress—great persecution for portion of his life. Have you thought of anyone who might fit this description?

Now, I did not come up with this myself. But, once I was clued in to it, I thought it has great merit, and that is the prophet Jeremiah. As a matter of fact, I think that he makes a better candidate than David. But, I will not say “yay,” or “nay” to either one, but Jeremiah I think really fits well with this.

Turn to Jeremiah. Remember that the author said that he spoke before kings.

**Jeremiah 1:1-2** The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the fifth month.

Though it only mentions three kings by name, there were actually five kings in this time period. So we can put a check beside that clue, that Jeremiah also spoke before kings, as did David.

We can understand that Jeremiah also bore reproach because of his faithful service to God.

**Jeremiah 15:15** O LORD, You know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In Your enduring patience, do not take me away. Know that for Your sake I have suffered rebuke.

We could go to a lot more that Jeremiah said regarding the times that he was persecuted. He was also famously imprisoned in a mud pit for a while, which we saw in one of those verses in Psalm 119 which says that they had hewn pits for him, so this fits Jeremiah quite well.

Jeremiah was surrounded by critics and enemies, perhaps through his entire service. And it was by people who did not seek God's law.

**Jeremiah 11:18-19** Now the LORD gave me knowledge of it, and I know it; for You showed me their doings. But I was like a docile lamb brought to the slaughter; and I did not know that they had devised schemes against me,

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saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be remembered no more."

Here Jeremiah was aware that they were plotting against him, these people who despise God, to get rid of him. We can see that also in Jeremiah 18:

**Jeremiah 18:18** Then they said, "Come and let us devise plans against Jeremiah; for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet [just as it had been revealed above]. Come and let us attack him with the tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words."

And then there follows a prayer:

**Jeremiah 18:23** Yet, LOORD, You know all their counsel which is against me, to slay me. Provide no atonement for their iniquity, nor blot out their sin from Your sight; but let them be overthrown before You. Deal thus with them in the time of Your anger.

Another interesting thing is from Jeremiah 31. If you remember your chapters, this is the New Covenant. God revealed the New Covenant to Jeremiah and He called it the law written on the heart. Psalm 119 is all about the law being written on the heart. (We do not need to go to any of those verses today. If you wish to check them later, they are verses 11, 32, 80, among others.) God's Word affects his heart.

We know that the writer wept over the plight of his people:

**Psalm 119:28** My soul melts from heaviness; strengthen me according to Your word.

**Psalm 119:136** Rivers of water run down from my eyes, because men do not keep Your law.

**Jeremiah 9:1** Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my

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people!

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet.

**Jeremiah 9:18** Let them make haste and take up a wailing for us, that our eyes may run with tears, and our eyelids gush with water.

Jeremiah is also thought to have written the book of Lamentations.

**Lamentations 1:16** "For these things I weep; my eye, my eye overflows with water; because the comforter, who should restore my life, is far from me. My children are desolate because the enemy prevailed."

It is very similar in all three places—Psalm 119, Jeremiah, and Lamentations.

However in the midst of all this catastrophe, and the danger that he was under, Jeremiah rejoiced in God's Word, and nourished himself in it. He learned and grew.

**Psalm 119:111** Your testimonies I have taken as a heritage forever, for they are the rejoicing of my heart.

**Jeremiah 15:16** Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for I am called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts.

Finally, as I have said already, the fact that Jeremiah is likely the author of Lamentations, and four of those chapters are also acrostic like Psalm 119, make him an excellent candidate for the author of Psalm 119.

Obviously, we cannot get through 176 verses in one sermon, so there will be two more. Frankly, going into Psalm 119 is a daunting task, because although there seems to be just one thought that is endlessly repeated, a closer inspection brings that while it can seem to harp continuously on this main theme, there are depths and variations aplenty. And we know that God's Word is multifaceted, and that is what Jeremiah or David, or whoever, was trying to bring out; that it applies to every situation. There is nothing that

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God's Word or law does not cover.

Charles Spurgeon, you may have heard of him, was a Protestant preacher in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who described his experiences with Psalm 119 in his *Treasury of David*.

I have been bewildered in the expanse of the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm. Its dimensions and its depth alike overcame me. It spread itself out before me like a vast rolling prairie to which I could see no bound, and this alone created a feeling of dismay. Its expanse was unbroken by a bluff or a headland, and hence it threatened a monotonous task, although the fear has not been realized. This marvelous poem seemed to me a great sea of holy teaching moving in its many verses wave upon wave, altogether without an island of special or remarkable statement to break it up. I confess I hesitated to launch upon it. Other Psalms have been mere lakes, but this is the main ocean. It is a continent of sacred thought; every inch of which is as fertile as the Garden of the Lord. It is an amazing level and abundance; a mighty stretch of harvest fields.

And then he went on to prove it. Spurgeon, in that book *Treasury of David* wrote 349 pages on Psalm 119. But, he is not the one who gets the record for the amount written about Psalm 119.

A man named Charles Bridges, who is a Church of England evangelical in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote 481 pages on Psalm 119. He is a piker.

Thomas Manta who was a Puritan, a very prolific Puritan, takes the prize. He wrote a three volume work with each volume about 500 to 600 pages each, totally 1677 pages on just Psalm 119. That three volume work contains 190 long chapters. That is 14 more than there are verses in Psalm 119.

So, with only three sermons, that puts me only in the "piker" range!

Now, the most striking feature of Psalm 119 is that each verse refers to the Word of God, the Bible, the law; there are only a very few exceptions. Some say that there is one exception, some say three, some have say five.

If it is five, that means that 171 out of 176 verses repeat the theme somehow of God's Word. Now that is diligent, repetitive, Deuteronomy 6:7 instruction.

Let us conclude then in Psalm 19. I want to read these just so, as we leave this sermon, we have the theme in our minds, because David compresses it, here, into five verses:

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**Psalm 19:7-11** The law of the LOORD is perfect, converting the soul;

The testimony of the LOORD is sure, making wise the simple;

The statutes of the LOORD are right, rejoicing the heart;

The commandment of the LOORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;

The fear of the LOORD is clean, enduring forever;

The judgments of the LOORD are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold,

Yea, than much fine gold;

Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.

Moreover by them Your servant is warned,

And in keeping them there is great reward.

This is a convenient synopsis of Psalm 119. We can call this the kernel or the nut from which the great tree of Psalm 119 grows. If we were to go through it, David only uses six synonyms, while in Psalm 119, there are at least 10 synonyms for law, or word that are used there. And the Jews have said that they have counted 10, one each for the 10 Commandments.

As Psalm 19 shows us, God's law is the perfect revelation of the mind and character of God. And as Paul said in II Timothy 3:16-17, it "is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." That is what we need to keep in mind as we study Psalm 119.