

Psalms 19-03-28a

Good evening, welcome to the Thursday night Bible class at Grace & Truth Bible Church. This is March the 28th of 2019 and we continue our look at the Psalms, specifically the Acrostic Psalms. We've been, I say we in the generalized sense meaning I have been sort of preoccupied and fascinated by the Acrostic Psalms that are contained in this great book and having looked last time at Psalm 111 and 112, we'll do a quick review of that and then move on to the next great Acrostic Psalm, the Magnum Opus, the longest Psalm in the hymn book which is Psalm 119.

Let's take a moment to ask God's blessing on our fellowship and on our study and then we'll begin. Father we are so grateful for all of your many blessings. You sustain us, you protect us, you provide for our needs, you challenge us and selectively allow things to come our way, to strengthen our faith, to give us opportunities to apply what we have learned and to see the reality of your promises and your watch care over us.

We thank you for all these things. We thank you most of all for the Lord Jesus and for the salvation that we have through him. We are grateful that even now he extends our salvation as he intercedes on our behalf and represents us before your throne.

We thank you for this passage of scripture that is before us tonight and the opportunity to study it together. We pray that your Holy Spirit will minister these truths to each heart to help us to see the meaning of it, the purpose of it and the application of it in our lives so that the time that remains to us in this life will be used to maximum advantage, that we will be as prepared as possible for that soon coming day when the Lord Jesus will return and take us to himself and we will enter into the next wonderful phase of your plan in the eternal realms. We pray all these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

If you are not present here this evening, you're welcome to come. There's some seating available, but if you're at a distance, I did manage to make good on my threat last week to boil down the comparison of Psalm 111 and 112 to outline form a document, a PDF, which is linked on the website. If you go to the audio archives and go to the Psalms book listing, you will see for last week interleaved there a, don't, it's, that's the devil calling.

Excuse me, can I interrupt? But you'll see there a linked document. There's a color-coded side-by-side of Psalm 111 and 112. Those who are here tonight have a hard copy of it.

And I did not put a legend for what the colors mean. It's fairly self-evident. The yellow highlights are the more or less exact comparisons between the two Psalms where the same phrase occurs in each.

And that's specifically in verse one and verse three and verse four. That helps us to see the butterfly wing effect of these two Psalms, the symmetry of them and where they specifically tie together. And if you remember, that was the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph, and then the sixth letter, which was Wau, and then the seventh letter, which was Zion, and then the

eighth letter, which was Chet, and of course the seventh letter in the middle.

That is the major point of comparison that is bracketed by Wau and by Chet, the six and eight. The seventh letter there, the number of perfection for God, is this comparison between the Lord making His wonderful works to be remembered and the righteous man who is upright and has light in the darkness. So those are not so much parallel as complementary.

This is the point of intersection because God has done these mighty works and made them to be remembered. The upright man who does remember them and who uses them in the way that God intended in His memory and in His reflection and meditation and application is going to find light on His path. So the remainder of the highlighting there in the light blue shows you things that are comparable in the parallel verses.

And as I suggested last time, you can actually read these verses, actually the letters of the verses. Remember there's two letters in each of the first eight verses and then verse 9 and 10 have three letters each so that you end up with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. But if you read each line, each strophe, side by side as I have them here separated out, just read left to right and go all the way down, you'll find that there is that comparison.

So I did about half of the psalm that way and you can do the rest. But I wanted to direct your attention to this and mainly tonight in thinking back on what we saw last time, it is the remembrance of the use of the acrostic. We're looking at acrostic psalms and each psalm that we have looked at has used the acrostic in a slightly different way.

And when we finish our study of Psalm 119, which will take us a few Thursday nights to complete, not many, we're not going to go necessarily word by word or verse by verse because there's 176 verses and at the depth that I typically like to go we'd be I think about 53 years into the millennium before I finish. So we'll take an overview and we'll observe the function of the acrostic specifically and the representative principles that all of us can then take and read the rest of the psalm at our leisure and reflect on it. We have the tools and the clues to parse as much of it as we are led to investigate.

But we'll begin tonight and I'll just give you some of the characteristics of this psalm. Because it is so large, it's helpful to have an introduction to it almost like you would to a book. There are several books of the Bible that don't have this many verses, so it's sort of a book unto itself.

It is an acrostic psalm and this puts an additional channel of communication in play as we've seen with the previous acrostics, Psalm 37, Psalm 24, Psalm 111 and 112. We have this one and then we have Psalm 147, I'm sorry, 145 coming up. I think I said 24, Psalm 25 was our acrostic.

We also had one earlier split between Psalm 9 and Psalm 10. But these psalms have this additional structural element or organizing principle as an element and so we ask ourselves, why? It's not just haphazard, nothing is wasted, nothing is by chance, nothing is superfluous in God's word. So a lot of times you go in and find content and a lot of analysis of the content, but

we want to also pay attention to the form.

The form is acrostic and as I think I've mentioned before, in this case we're going to have eight lines per letter. And even in your New King James, it is such a feature that you have the Hebrew letters printed and named, transliterated beside in your Bible. So you'll notice right under the Psalm 119 heading, if you've got a New King James like mine, it says, helpfully, meditations on the excellencies of the Word of God.

Then it has an Aleph and then it says Aleph in capital letters. And then it's got a little sub note that says various prayers and praises. I'm not quite sure what this adds to my understanding, but they printed it in there anyway.

And then the Psalm begins. You'll notice then under that Aleph you have eight verses and verse eight ends with the plea, do not forsake me utterly. And then you have Beth, the second letter, the letter B and eight more verses.

And it continues in this fashion through the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet so that eight times 22 is 176. And in fact, you have 176 verses. So we know that we've got a complete 22 letter acrostic here.

Let me read you a few comments that have been made as you peruse the various commentaries and things. Noel Friedman, who is a well-known guy in Hebrew commentary circles, said the creativity of Psalm 119 is the creativity of the puzzle builder, the crafts person, mathematically rather than metaphorically complex. You have to kind of think about that for a minute, but he says the author is creative, but this is the creative type of effort that is someone who builds a puzzle, not someone who plumbs the depth of poetic expression.

So he's more interested. It's like, have you ever tried to make your own crossword? I've done this a few times when I was teaching school or whatnot, trying to get terms. You know, sometimes you want to give your kids some help when they're taking seventh grade science or whatever.

And so I made a crossword one time out of the terms that they needed to know. And then I would give clues like a crossword puzzle and it would give them some help if there was a few letters already in there for some of these more complex terms. But you know that you sometimes have to really strain and stretch and compromise to fit a form.

If you're trying to create a doggerel or a limerick or a haiku or something that limits how many words you can use or how long a line can be or things have to rhyme or they have to be iambic pentameter, which is basically ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump ba-dump. That's iambic pentameter. If you're not in college, they would never stoop to that rhythm, but that's what it is.

So what what Friedman is saying here is that Psalm 119, he's being a little bit critical and he's

saying it's not very deep because the guy had to work so hard to make it fit the acrostic. And you could imagine that it would be a challenge for a normal unaided human brain to come up with eight lines, all of which begin with the same letter. And that's what happens here, because it's not just verse one that begins with Aleph, but verse one, verse two, verse three, verse four, verse five, verse six, verse seven, and verse eight, each begin with Aleph.

So he says, well, it's done by a craftsperson, so it is mathematically rather than metaphorically complex. Its structure is complex, but he's saying it's shallow water that doesn't run very deep. Now, I just offer you that thought as an introductory point of observation that somebody else made, because I think you're going to see that God the Holy Spirit is not just a puzzle builder, and he's not limited to being shallow because he had a hard time thinking up words that begin with Aleph.

Who wrote the Hebrew language? Who invented Hebrew? I think God, knowing that he's going to eventually put Psalm 119 into the inspired canon of Scripture, could make sure that there's enough Aleph words to fit his purpose without having to be shallow or just a puzzle builder and not being metaphorically complex. That's just something I'll throw on the table in advance. We'll look at this and you can see what you think.

But in Psalm 25, if you remember, it was a plea for deliverance and forgiveness by David. It's the Psalm of David, and remember he said, To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in you.

Let me not be ashamed. Let not my enemies triumph over me. Let no one who waits on you be ashamed.

Let those be ashamed who deal treacherously without a cause. Show me your ways, O Lord. Teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation, and so on. And in that case, you know how when you are feeling desperate and you are ready to go before the Lord and bring a case, it's easy to become defensive. It's easy to be overly verbose.

If you've ever had somebody who wanted to explain to you why things were the way they were and they just wanted to run on and on and give you a whole lot of excess verbiage, one of the things that a necrostic does is it imposes not only structure but a length limit. The only way you can get around that is to do more than one line with the same letter. So in these relatively short earlier psalms that we've looked at, the necrostic, by the time you get to your 22nd letter, you're done.

You've got to say what you need to say within that constraint. And so it speaks in a situation like that where you're pleading for deliverance, you're pleading for help from God, for forgiveness, for vindication, and so on, to not overdo it. Jesus castigated the Pharisees who were in the habit of standing on the street corner and making long prayers.

Figure out what you want to say, say it, and get off. Let the next person have their turn, so to speak. That's one function of a necrostic.

It's not the only function, and it's not the consistent function. How many different ways can you use a shelf? Let's say you've got a two-foot wide shelf and it's got six shelves counting the top. You might put books on it, and you might stuff it.

You might want to hold as many books as possible, right? You might put it in a wall that needs some decoration, and leave a lot of space, and put some knickknacks, or a vase, and a little statuette, and some other interesting things to look at. And you might use the space. You might use it to hold DVDs, or CDs, or videos, or something.

Same structure used for markedly different purposes. Think of an acrostic that way. So Psalm 25, for example, uses it one way.

Psalm 111 and Psalm 112 used a double acrostic tied together to have like an open book. They didn't have books in those days, but to have God on the left and the upright on the right. And as you can see in my printout, you're invited to compare contrast and see the symmetry between the Lord and the one who is returning to the image of the Lord.

Man was made in God's image, but we fell away from that. The upright man, by faith and by claiming God's righteousness, by soaking himself in God's Word, begins to once again reflect. It's a reflection.

And there's some of these reflections are comparative. Some of them are contrasts. I would draw your attention in Psalm 37, for example, to the very last line in Psalm 111, talking about the Lord.

God's praise, the Lord's praise, endures forever. In Psalm 112, the last line is, the wicked who has forsaken the way of the Lord, isn't interested in it, has rejected it, is going to perish. So the things of the Lord endure, the things that aren't of the Lord perish.

And you're invited, each of these trophies, as you go from 111 to 112, you can put them side by side and you can have a devotion for that whole day, just looking at, now why would he put these two things side by side? Sometimes it's very obvious, like the yellow highlighted, you know, God's righteousness endures forever and the righteousness that God grants to the upright is going to endure forever. So one's a capital H and one's a small h. And it's a direct bequest, it's a direct gift from God. God gives us something of himself that is eternal and we have it and it is eternal for us as well.

But others are more sophisticated and require more thought and challenge us and invite us to think. And so when he says that the Lord gives, he has given food to those who fear him, he will be ever mindful of his covenant, of his promise. And across from that a good man deals graciously and lends.

He will guide his affairs with discretion. And you think, well on the one side you have God making these covenant promises and giving provision to those who fear him. Freely you have received, freely give.

Is a verse from another place in the Bible. And how does that work itself out? Well, I should just make promises and fulfill them like God does. But the concomitant, the parallel is you've got to do this with discretion.

We are not omniscient. We can't do some of the things that God does because we don't have the full set of attributes of deity. And so where God makes a covenant and honors that covenant because he's the all-powerful all-knowing God, we can look and see where there is an opportunity for us to do what God does, which is to give and to lend.

But we have to exercise discretion. We've got to work on perception and be sure that we do it at the right time in the right way for the right people in a way that glorifies God. So just that line, you can sit and reflect on that and then go to the Lord in prayer and ask for that discretion and cultivate that discretion and so on.

So anyway, this is a different use for the acrostic. Now in Psalm 119 we have an acrostic here and this Psalm is basically extolling, you've probably heard this about Psalm 119, that in all but one or two verses there is some allusion, if not a direct reference, to the Word of God. And more about that in a moment.

But it is a paean of praise for God's Word, and it's really God's truth. The truth that God has communicated to us is appreciated throughout this Psalm. In the light of that recognition, it also is going to make requests, and it is going to recognize need.

Here is the wonderful provision of God's Word. I am a human being who needs it, and oh Lord please help me to understand it and apply it. And there are recognitions of our attitude toward it and our need for it and requests along that line.

So people who like to classify Psalms, there's sort of a standard, and I've gone out of my way to avoid telling you that, well, this is a wisdom poem or this is a corporate hymn of praise or this is an individual lament or whatever, because I think those are artificial categories that the authors of the Psalms knew nothing about. So if you pick up a commentary on the Psalms or you hear somebody talking about, oh well, Psalm 25 is a Psalm of individual lament, well, if you're asking me, I put no stock in that. Because the people who use those categories spend as much time talking about, well, this Psalm seems to follow that, but then if there's an exception in the following sections, I think, well, you're trying to shoehorn this into your preconceived grid of Psalm types.

But each of these eight lines for each letter focuses on a theme in Psalm 119. So there is an organizing principle of remembrance. You think, how could I possibly memorize 176 verses? I was pretty proud of myself for memorizing Psalm 91 or some of the longer sections of scripture

that we've had.

But to memorize 176, one of the things that would greatly aid you is to say, well, what I'm really doing is I'm memorizing 22 eight-verse Psalms. I can memorize an eight-verse Psalm, and if I do that less than two dozen times, I've got the whole thing done. Not only that, but I can remember those 22 Psalms in order because they're alphabetical.

And if I can remember any one of the eight lines, I can probably remember the others because they begin with the same letter. Now, the overarching theme of this psalm is God's law, the Torah, the revealed Word of God, Torah. You can write that word down, Torah.

The theme, the overall theme, everything in this psalm revolves around it, whether it is recognizing our need for it, expressing our thanks for it, finding ourselves convicted by it, wanting to have a greater understanding of it, wanting to comply, conform, and live in its path and in its light. It all has to do with Torah. It would be exceedingly tedious to have the word Torah repeated 176 times.

So, the psalmist here is going to use seven, count them, seven synonyms for the Torah, seven of them. So, plus the word Torah itself, how many do you have? Eight. Seven, it's a perfect set of descriptions of God's perfect law, and with eight, this is the new day, the eighth day, the day of circumcision, the day of entrance, the eighth day entrance into God's kingdom, and then the future with the Father, and so on.

There's seven and then eight. You get that complete set, now you're ready for new life, a new plane of existence, and so on. Let me go ahead and give you these seven synonyms, and we will watch for them.

The word Torah itself, when it's used as talking about what you find in Deuteronomy, for example, is going to be found 25 times in this psalm. Torah is used 25 times. So, but that's kind of our header, that's our main subject, Torah.

The first synonym for it is Deber, or Debrim, which is D, you can just put DBR, because just depending on its form, it's going to have different vowels, but DBR, and this comes from the verb Dabar, which means to speak or to say, and the noun form means word or words, so you might have Debrim, or you might have Dabar, word or words. DBR is the first synonym, and you can just put the verb if you want, Dabar, but it means word or words. That's used 24 times.

Torah, 25 times, Dabar, 24 times. The next term is Edut, and this is terms, covenant terms, laws or rules, and I'll show you the translation in the New King James. Edut, this would be E-D-U-T, or E-D-U-T-H, it's kind of a soft T there, Edut, and this is, we'll call it terms of the covenant, this is precepts maybe, or mandates, mandates might be a good translation.

How many times do you think that's used? Torah was 25, Dabar, 24, 23, yeah, Edut is used 23 times. The next term is Mishpatim, Mishpatim, the center of that is Shafat, which is the verb that means to judge, Shofet is the noun that means judge, put an M in front of it, turn a verb

into a noun, and so you have Mishpat, those things that come from judging, so naturally this would be judgments, rulings, rulings from the bar, from the judge. Mishpatim and Chokim, or Chakim, or Chakot, statutes and laws, and those are very similar, that's 22 times.

So Mishpat, that would be M-I-S-H-P-A-T, or Mishpatim, put an I-M on the end, M-I-S-H-P-A-T-I-M, Mishpatim, and then Chokim is C-H-O-Q-I-M, just depends on, it's a soft O, it doesn't have a wow in there, but so that's 22 times. Then we have another synonym, which is Mitzvot, Mitzvah, Mitzvot, Mitzvot, M-I-T-S-O-T, or O-T-H, Mitzvot, or Mitzvot, these are commands. How many times do you think that's going to be used? 21 times, 21 times, Mitzvot.

Torah, 25 times, Devarim, 24 times, Eduth, 23 times, Mishpatim and Chokim, statutes and laws and rulings, legal renderings, in other words, 22 times, Mitzvot, 21 times, and then we have Amrah or Imrot, which comes from Amar, which is the verb to say, to speak or to say, remember we had Devar, which meant to speak, but it emphasizes the words that you say, the content of what you say, Amar emphasizes the action of speaking itself, and Amar, this is the noun that comes from that verb, so it'd be Amra or Amra or Imra, it just depends, sayings, and that's 20 times, 25, 24, 23, 22, 21, 20, that gives you your, and a couple of those we're adding the two words together because they're very similar. Once in a while we're going to find that path or way is included as something indicating following God's truth in a general sense, but it's not used in the noun form the way these seven synonyms for the Torah are used. So what's our big impression here? What's the big idea so far from Psalm 119? This is a very orderly, structured set of 22 shelves.

We've seen these shelves used for other purposes in the other psalms, and by the time we conclude the acrostic psalms, I'll give you a summary comparing the acrostic across, the use of the acrostic across all of these psalms. But in this particular case, we're taking 22 shelves and we're arranging eight items on each shelf. We've got the olive shelf with eight verses, the bait shelf with eight verses, and so on, that gives us a very fulsome collection.

What is the bookcase dedicated to? If you're going in the Smithsonian and you go to a particular section and a particular subsection, and here's a particular display, this one is dedicated to God's truth, God's law, the Torah. This is the showcase. Everything in it relates somehow to the beauty, the necessity, the function, the desirability of God's law.

And it is going to be described with these seven synonyms, each one giving a different aspect. Isn't it interesting that, talking about the Holy Spirit, what are the two parts of our spiritual epoxy? We've got the Word and the Spirit, right? One without the other doesn't function properly. We need them both pretty much in equal measure.

So we're here going to be talking about the Word of God, the truth of God, the law of God, statutes, commandments, ordinances, precepts, and so on. But the other half that we always recognize is the Holy Spirit, right? But what do we know about the Holy Spirit? A couple of places, very interestingly, He is described as being sevenfold, right? The Spirit of Wisdom and Knowledge, I will put My Spirit upon Him, the Spirit of, in Isaiah, and then it gives seven

characteristics of the Spirit. Remember, there's another place that says that the seven spirits before God's throne, I think it's in Revelation, the seven spirits before the throne, remember that? It's one Holy Spirit, but there are seven facets, seven angles from which you can view the Spirit.

We don't find out too much about the distinctions between the sevenfold Spirit other than seven speaks of His perfection, right? But we get a little bit of it in the Isaiah. Well, that's not our subject tonight, but here, God's Law, we have a sevenfold set of facets of God's Word. You've got a sevenfold Spirit, you've got a sevenfold presentation of God's Word here in Psalm 119.

Seven synonyms for God's Law. So this is fascinating, and the structure and the discipline of it is designed to communicate to us above just the raw content. So as maturing believers, we want to be sensitive to that structure as well as the content.

You think about adults who manage children. I would say parents with children, but any more. I've been in many households, I was in one yesterday, where grandparents are babysitting, raising, managing the kids.

And this is more and more frequent. The nature of our society is such that it's just how it's falling out. No criticism, nothing wrong with it, but the fact remains that many times somebody other than the biological parents are in charge of the kids.

And when they're small, it's all about getting across the basic message. Keep that sippy cup top up. Don't leave the table until I tell you it's okay.

Ask if you can be excused. Please keep the door shut. Don't let the dog out.

Brush your teeth. Wash your hands. Comb your hair.

The content is everything. Your goal is to make sure they understand what you want and what they need. And they communicate back in a similar fashion.

I'm hungry. I'm tired. I'm wet, which is what the babies tell you by a certain kind of crying.

I'm tired. I'm overstimulated. I boiled it down when we had our little ones to five reasons why a baby cries.

And if you check those five things, one of them is going to be it. Well, as you grow, you notice how sometimes adults will communicate to young adults and fellow adults in a much more subtle fashion. You can say a thing, but the form in which you say it, the form that you choose, communicates as much or more as what you actually say.

The most obvious instance of this is sarcasm. Somebody puts a plate of liver and onions in front of you and say, well, I can hardly wait. Well, if I said, I can hardly wait, that doesn't convey sarcasm.

I need the form that tells you to adjust your understanding of the content to what I really mean. That's an obvious case. But content works with form to help us understand its intent and its emphasis and its purpose and what it's really saying.

I'll give you a great example of that, if I can get to it in the second session or in the first session next time, having to do with Jesus talking about if your eye offends you, pluck it out. There's a wonderful analysis of form and content there that helps us understand why that radical piece of guidance is a part of his teaching. But we're going to pay attention to both here tonight and we're going to begin, we'll take a look at the Aleph letter, kind of like we looked at the first five letters last time to get the gist.

And this will help us understand the pattern and set us up for understanding all of the remaining 168 verses. But here's, I always think, you know, sometime in the future, somebody's probably doing it like I did, staying up late or making time during a lunch hour or something to hear one lesson and they can't hear both sessions. Well, I don't have anything to work with out of that because you didn't finish the thought.

Here's the thought. The form is as important as the content everywhere that God communicates his word, up to and including the incarnate word. You think about Jesus being the fullness of deity in bodily form, but what was that form? I am meek and lowly of heart.

He had no form or comeliness that we should desire him. He didn't put on an extravagant, glorious, majestic, rich appearance. He was ordinary.

He was unremarkable in his form. What made him the Son of God? What made him the greatest human being that has ever lived or ever will? The content filled and imbued the humble humanity with supernatural grace and supernatural power and a supernatural ability to deliver salvation to us. The word of God in its written form, 66 books in our English Bible, a few less in the Hebrew Bible, is carefully constructed.

Prophecy is prophetic for a reason. Poetry is poetic for a reason. History is historical narrative for a reason.

The didactic and preaching and teaching portions of the pastoral epistles and of the general epistles to the churches is in that form for a reason. Any time you think about the word of God, not only can we enrich ourselves by absorbing the truth of the content, but it will be enhanced. It will be seasoned.

It will be flavored. It will be complemented and exponentially more valuable when we recognize why God put it in the form that he put it in. These acrostics help us understand that.

I think, well, why aren't all Psalms acrostic? Aren't they all memorable? Aren't they all equally valuable? Well, God has given us a hint here that if you pay attention to this form, look at what a blessing you get. Pay attention to form everywhere, and we'll see how that works itself out in this Psalm as we go forward. But if you're working through a gospel such as Matthew, as we are

doing on Sunday mornings, why is it a narrative? Why couldn't it be a poem about Jesus and his ministry? Why did Jesus speak in parables? Why does he use if this, then that? We're going to see coming up very soon in the Sermon on the Mount that there is a structure there.

There is a form in which that sermon is delivered different from some of Jesus' other sermons. Why does he do that? When we pay attention, it's like stereo. Instead of just getting one channel, like we did when I was a kid and all you had was AM radio, you're getting two, and it gives you depth, and it gives you appreciation.

Believe me when I tell you Psalm 119 is a lot more than a puzzle maker trying to get words to fit this acrostic pattern. It is this way for a reason. God the Holy Spirit wrote this poem, and it is rich, and we'll see it as we continue.

Let's pause here and take our break.