

**A sermon preached by Emma Hodge at St. Michael and All Angels Church,
Sandhurst on
Sunday 8th March 2020**

Speak Lord your servants are listening you have the words of eternal life.

Today we continue our sermon series on the psalms and we are looking at psalm 119. Psalm 119 is the longest psalm and is made up of 1-76 verses, broken down into 22 stanzas each with 8 verses. Each stanza starts with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet making it an acrostic psalm. It is also in the centre of the bible.

The temptation with this psalm is not to read the whole psalm but instead just a few verses, however I would encourage you to invest the time in reading the entire psalm; when reading the entire psalm you get a sense of the majesty and beauty of the psalm as well as the commitment of the psalmist to the theme, these are sometimes lost when you read only a few verses.

The psalm is an individual psalm and is a personal reflection and meditation. There is no author attributed to the psalm and scholars debate who wrote it, but whoever wrote this psalm, they spent 176 verses meditating on a recurring theme, that of learning, understanding and applying God's word to their lives.

We are fortunate that in our country today, we can access a range of bibles in several different formats including print, audio versions and versions available via the internet or an app. However, how often do we spend time learning, understanding and applying God's word to our lives?

The psalmist knew the importance of this, the very first verse of the psalm states why it is important to learn, understand and apply scripture to our lives.

“Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD¹.”

The opening verse echoes a lot of the psalm, not only does the psalmist mention God's law, but also actions that need to be taken and the result.

God's law is the most common of eight words used by the psalmist to describe scripture. (The words are different in Hebrew as well as in English); The word used for law has linguistic roots in being taught directly from God.

The actions in this verse (and is repeated throughout the psalm) is walking. Walking is an action. While we can look at the physical action of walking, we can

¹ Psalm 119:1 NIV

also apply it as imagery and relate it to our lives as a journey; it is no good just to have a bible or access to the bible, we need to use it.

When we have learnt the message of the scripture then we need to understand it before we apply it to our lives, and in doing so, as verse 1 mentions, we will be blessed.

And don't worry, I'm not going to go through the psalm verse by verse!! But I did want to start with verse 1.

Moving onto verse 105 which was read a little while ago, this is a well-known verse and speaks of God's word as being a light to our path.

In twenty-first century Sandhurst, at night, we don't have true darkness, we have lights from houses, street lights and cars, but if you have ever camped or walked down an unlit country road at night, you will know the importance of light. You need light to see where you are going, but also the hazards, you don't want to trip over guy ropes or bump into anything.

This applies to our lives as well. We need a light to guide our way to see hazards and how they can be addressed. The bible is the equivalent of light. We have to turn light on, and with scripture, that means we need to have the bible, read and understand it.

Understanding the bible is not always easy as it involves looking at more than just a few verses and often understanding the context and culture which the passage was written in. Once God's word has been learnt and understood we need to apply it to our lives, despite what obstacles and challenges we are presented with.

It is clear that the psalmist was no stranger to hard times and suffering as there are several references² to him facing just this and yet the message remains strong. Stick to God's laws. Don't give up. The psalmist also knew that as well as persecution and enemies, he had to fight against the temptations of not following God's law due to his own humanity and this is why he asks for help from God to keep to God's word.

While the theory of knowing scripture, understanding scripture and applying it to our lives is good, I want to take a few minutes to look at some examples of people who did just that. As today is international Women's day, I've chosen three very different women.

² V6; v51, v61, v67, v69-71, v78, v107, v109, v119, v121, v139, v157, v161,

Firstly, St Perpetua, whose feast day was yesterday. St Perpetua was a noble woman of Carthage in Africa who was martyred, along with Felicity and their companions for her faith in 203 AD. She was 22 when she was killed and the mother of a young son whom she was breastfeeding. Her pagan father, urged her to renounce her faith. She pointed at a water jug and said could it be called anything other than a water jug. When her father said no. she responded saying that she could be called nothing else but a Christian as that is who she was. She was baptized before going to prison and was told by God to pray for nothing but endurance in her forthcoming trials. Her faith was strong and she frequently saw visions from God and her faith encouraged other people.

Does the same apply to us?

Can we be called anything but Christian by the way we live our lives?

And would others see that?

Do we pray for strength when we are faced with trials of life?

OK, if you are struggling to relate to St. Perpetua, then how about a Victorian woman who lived in Sandhurst?

Jane Monkton-Jones

Jane Monkton-Jones, for those of you who don't know the history of St. Michael and All Angels, Jane was one of the daughters of Rev. Henry Parsons who oversaw the rebuilding of this church. Jane was not a typical Victorian woman. She was a talented wood and stone carver as is evidenced by this pulpit and font. Jane knew the creator God and close examination of the pulpit shows the evidence of this with her detailed carving of passion flowers, acorn cups and wheat (to name just three). Throughout scripture there are references to God being the creator of the environment, and this aspect is more important than ever with the challenges we are facing as we are in a climate emergency and need to focus on the care of God's world.

If neither of these relate to you, then how about our third woman. Dr Jennifer Wiseman,

Dr Wiseman is a leading astrophysicist working at NASA and on the Hubble Telescope. She is also a director of an organization linking science, religion and ethics³ and spends much of her time speaking to church groups and schools about faith and science.

³ <https://www.aaas.org/person/dr-jennifer-wiseman> - Dialogue on Science, Ethics and Religion Program at American Association for the Advancement of Science

Her career started as a child growing up on a farm in the Ozark mountains of Arkansas where she saw the night sky. Her work and her faith go hand in hand and as in the words of psalm 19 "The heavens are telling the glory of God"⁴

In the video ⁵we are about to watch, she explains that her career as an astrophysicist has developed her faith and especially her understanding of God the creator has changed as a result of her work.

So what do these three women, and the psalmist have in common?

All of them, very different people, across very different times and cultures. All of them had challenges, challenges which meant that they would face persecution, face being told they couldn't do that.

All of them linked by one thing, their faith.

They knew God, knew him through scripture, studied him and applied God's word to their lives, and others can see that they were Christians by how they lived their lives.

Is the same true for us?

Do we know God?

Do we know God through His word?

Do we study God's word?

Do we apply it to our lives so that others can see it in us?

St Perpetua, Jane Monkton-Jones and Dr Jennifer Wiseman, as well as the unknown psalmist; All of them focussed on God and that how they lived out their lives despite the challenges that they faced. God is not just there for the good times, he is there constantly, he is with us at work, at home as well as here in church. He is with us whatever life throws at us, however much we struggle, God is with us. We can turn to him in good times and in bad. The bible does not contain scripture for when life is going well, but also for when you are struggling.

The message is the same, have a bible, use it, understand it and apply to our lives.

Amen

⁴ Psalm 19:1

⁵ <https://www.testoffaith.com/resources/resource.aspx?id=481>

For more help on understanding the bible please join a house group or see

<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/>

www.ucb.co.uk/wordforyou.

Scripture Union have daily bible notes online, at Wordlive.org. There's a short bible passage followed by a simple reflection and a more in-depth one, plus an alternative *Lectio Divina* method. Wordlive stays with the same Bible book for one or 2 weeks at a time, rather than dotting around.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/>

<https://www.brf.org.uk/bible-reading>

<https://odb.org/subscription/uk/>