

The LORD makes his ways known in his Word so that we can walk in them and by happy Psalm 119:1-8

Introduction and Context

General

- The Book of Psalms is a collection of Hebrew poetry written over a long period of time (approximately 1000 years) by many different authors (Asaph, Korah, Solomon, Jeduthun, Heman, Etan, Moses and David). These poems were written to be sung and used during the public worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem¹.
- God's covenant with his people serves as the central theological concept behind the psalms². God, the Sovereign King, has initiated a covenant (a binding agreement) with his people. Even though only 12 psalms explicitly mention the word covenant, all of the psalms were written in the context of a covenant relationship that exists between God and the people of Israel. The LORD will be their God, they will be his people (Genesis 17:7).
- The psalms show us that God's people were intimately aware of God's presence as they frequently reflect on God's past acts in history (his gracious deliverance from Egypt), extol God as the divine king, appeal to God's people to remain obedient to God's law (covenant), remind people of the basic principle of covenant life (blessings for obedience, curses for disobedience), and ask God for forgiveness.
- One purpose of the psalms is to help God's people confess a profound faith in and love towards God³. They do that by arousing our emotions and directing our wills so that we do not only think as we ought to think, but also feel what we ought to feel and long for that which we ought to long for⁴. With regard to our emotions, the psalms reflect the full spectrum of human emotions; reverence and awe for God (Psalm 8), shame/disappointment that God has not acted as expected (Psalm 44), fear (Psalm 56), sadness (Psalm 13), anger (Psalm 5), doubt regarding God's power or justice (Psalm 73), love (Psalm 18), etc. With regard to our wills, the psalms instruct us how we ought to behave as covenant people. Wisdom psalms (e.g. Psalm 1 and Psalm 119) in particular seek to do this by means of contrast between the righteous life and the life of the wicked⁵. The psalms also show us positive examples of what a life lived in obedience to God looks like, and also provide us with communal and enthusiastic exhortations to praise God together.
- The psalms give us an authorised and authentic response to God and his Word. We learn in them not only what God has said to us (the Word of God coming down); we also learn how we may and

¹ Longman & Enns, 2008.

² Longman, 1988.

³ Longman, 1988.

⁴ Ash, 2008: p12.

⁵ 'Psalm 1 is generally thought to have been consciously composed as a preface to the completed collection. The opening psalm speaks confidently of the two ways: the righteous flourish, while the wicked are blown away like chaff. This is due not to impersonal retributive forces but rather to the providential 'knowledge' of the LORD (Psalm 1:6)' (Longman & Enns, 2008: p811)

ought to respond (the word of God going back up). As a result, the psalms are of great practical importance in the Christian life and a vital protection against imbalance⁶.

Specific

- Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the Bible. It combines elements of a wisdom psalm and an individual lament psalm. It focuses on the “two-ways motif”: we can choose to walk in the ways of the LORD or in the ways of wickedness. In this psalm, the singer (the person who wrote the psalm) is someone who clearly delighted in God’s Word. More than twenty-five times he says that he delights in the Word of God or loves and longs for the Word of God. For him, it is delicious (119:103) and delightful. God’s Word is his hope, his peace, his joy, his song, his freedom and his comfort⁷.
- Psalm 119 was written as a celebration of the gift of God’s law. He is thankful to God for giving his people divine revelation of his will and he desires to be transformed by God’s Word. In his own delight and transformation, he also wants others to likewise admire God’s law so strongly that they will work and pray that it may shape their character and conduct⁸.
- Psalm 119 is also the most elaborate acrostic in the Old Testament. Psalms that follow an acrostic pattern begin each line with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, in the Hebrew, Psalm 119:1-8 begins each verse with the letter א (Aleph). In English, this would be equivalent to writing a poem where you try to begin each line with the letter A:

Adam was a boy
A rich and smart young man
Always laughing, having fun
Anxious for no one.

- I have just written four simple lines above, but Psalm 119 contains eight lines of verse in each stanza. Once you have written eight lines of verse all beginning with the letter A, you then need eight lines of verse all beginning with the letter B, then C and so on until you reach the letter Z. That is what the author of this poem has done. Where English has 26 letters in our alphabet, the Hebrew language only has 22. Nonetheless, the structure of this psalm demonstrates that the author had great skill. Not only must he follow this acrostic pattern, but each line of verse must also say something meaningful⁹.
- There are also other acrostic psalms in the Bible which are less elaborate. Psalms 37, 111, 112 and 114 are all written in an acrostic pattern. Incomplete acrostics are also found in Psalm 9, 10, 25 and 34. The precise reason why acrostic patterns were used by the Bible writers is unclear. It could have been as a means to aid memorisation or to show comprehensiveness (e.g. from A to Z)¹⁰.
- We don’t know who wrote this psalm. The name of the singer is never identified. There are some clues that suggest the psalm may have been written by a priest. In 119:79, the singer prays “May those who fear you turn to me, those who understand your statutes.” In the Old Testament, priests were responsible not only for serving in the Temple, they were also those who guarded and taught

⁶ Ash, 2008: p13.

⁷ Ash, 2008: p11.

⁸ Collins, 2008.

⁹ Twist, 2016.

¹⁰ Twist, 2016.

the Mosaic law to God's people (Deuteronomy 17:18 ; 24:8 ; Deuteronomy 31:9-13, 24-26 ; cf. 2 Chronicles 15:3; 31:4; 35:3; Ezra 7:24-26). By asking people to turn to him, perhaps, he is suggesting that they must come to him for teaching.

- We don't know when this psalm was written. It could have been written in the postexilic era after the return from Babylon in order to encourage God's people to covenant obedience¹¹. Some scholars also identify 'Aramaisms¹²' in the psalm that support a postexilic date. The psalm also appears to have been inspired by the book of Proverbs. What we can confirm is that it must have been written after the book of Deuteronomy¹³. This is because the psalm makes use of eight specific words which refer to God's revelation and of those words all but one come from that book¹⁴.
- A key feature of Psalm 119 is the use and repetition of eight words, all referring to the revelation of God. Each of these eight words, whilst being almost synonymous¹⁵, considers the expressed will of God from a different perspective¹⁶. One of these eight words is found in almost every single verse of the psalm and five stanzas employ all eight words whilst no stanza uses fewer than six. The use of these eight words might also explain why each stanza in the psalm contains eight lines of poetry¹⁷. Below is an explanation of the unique contribution made by each word¹⁸:
 - TORAH. The word used most frequently to refer to God's revelation is *Torah*¹⁹. This word comes from the Hebrew verb for teaching and it is a comprehensive term for all the instruction received from God. It is a sign of God's love since God shows his people how to live²⁰. In a narrow sense, it can be used to refer specifically to the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). But it can also refer to prophetic oracles (e.g. Isaiah 1:10). The NIV and the ESV translate this word as 'law' but it can also be translated as 'instruction'. Instruction might be a better translation today because we tend to associate law with something negative and restrictive and that is not the intention of the singer when he uses this Hebrew word.
 - EDOTH. This word is derived from the Hebrew word for witness. It conveys the idea of a word that bears witness to the faithfulness of the LORD and at the same time against the person who breaks faith with the LORD. The NIV translates this word as

¹¹ This opinion is held by VanGemeran (1988) and Allen (1983).

¹² An Aramaism is a characteristic feature of the Aramaic language which appears in a different language. Aramaic was spoken in the Assyrian Empire and also in the Persian Empire. Thus, if Aramaisms are found in Psalm 119, they suggest a time of writing after the return from exile since the Jews would have learned and been strongly influenced by Aramaic when they were in exile in Babylon.

¹³ According to Hill & Walton (2009), the book of Deuteronomy was written down close to the time when the speeches of Moses were given. Moses is the dominant voice in the book and could have been responsible for some of the writing. As such, the book could have been written before 1200 BC.

¹⁴ The only word which is not found in Deuteronomy is 'piqudim'. This word is found only in the psalms and it is synonymous with covenant and revelation (VanGemeran, 1988).

¹⁵ A synonym is a word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same as another word or phrase in the same language. For example, 'shut' is a synonym of 'close'.

¹⁶ Okorocho & Foulkes, 2006.

¹⁷ Longman, 2014.

¹⁸ The summaries for what each word means are taken from VanGemeran (1988), Ash (2008) and Barry et. al. (2012).

¹⁹ Perhaps this word is used most often, appearing 25 times in the psalm, because it should be understood as capturing the essence of the LORD's directions (Barry et. al., 2012).

²⁰ Collins, 2008.

‘statutes.’ The ESV translates this word as ‘testimonies.’ Observance of statutes signifies loyalty to the terms of the covenant between the LORD and his people.

- PIQQUDIM. As mentioned earlier, this Hebrew word is only found in the book of Psalms. It has a basic meaning of words appointed or charged by someone with authority and it is synonymous with the idea of covenant and revelation from God. It comes from the Hebrew word *paqad*, which can be translated “inspect” or “command.” The word *paqad* can also have the sense of entrusting something for safe keeping. The NIV and the ESV translate this word as ‘precepts.’

- CHOQQIM. Derived from the Hebrew root meaning to inscribe, this word emphasises that God is the author of his decrees and they are thus binding and permanent. It can also refer to a prescribed boundary. The NIV translates this word as ‘decrees.’ The ESV translates this word as ‘statutes.’

- MITSWAH. This word can refer to anything which the LORD has ordered. It comes from the verb meaning “to command” and is often used in Deuteronomy. The NIV and the ESV translate this word as ‘commandments.’

- MISHPATIM. This word refers to the decisions or the ruling verdict of a judge. In the Bible, most often it refers to the judgements of God and it expresses the way in which he runs the world. Specifically, the grace of the LORD who rules the world in favour of his covenant people. The word can also include the judgements we must make in response to God’s judgements; we must judge as he judges. The NIV translates this word as ‘laws.’ The ESV translates this word as ‘rules.’ Often however, it cannot be translated using either of these restrictive terms (e.g. 119: 84, 91, 120, 121, 132, 149).

- DABAR. This Hebrew word refers to any word that comes from the mouth of the LORD, thus being a general designation for divine revelation. It is found in the famous prophetic expression ‘The word of the LORD’ as well as the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:1, 28; Deuteronomy 4:13). The NIV and the ESV translate this word as ‘word.’

- IMRAH. The term *imrah* essentially means “something said,” and has a wide range of meaning. In Psalm 119, *imrah* is often a close synonym of *dabar* though it has the additional sense of something promised. The term occurs only in poetic texts, including poetry in the Pentateuch (e.g., Genesis 4:23; Deuteronomy 32:2). Both the NIV and the ESV translate this word as ‘word’ or ‘promise.’

- Covenant words of love: Each of the eight words mentioned above find their origin in the covenant between the LORD and his people. The strapline of the covenant is ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’ (Genesis 17:7-8). God created and established this relationship with Abraham and his descendants. God’s covenant promises begin with promises from God and not with obedient actions from people. These words create and sustain relationship. God promises and in response to his promises, God expects his people to walk in his ways.

Form and Structure

- We have already commented on the fact that Psalm 119 is a wisdom psalm written in the form of an acrostic and as a result, it is divided into 22 stanzas. A logical flow between these stanzas can be discerned²¹:
 - The first two stanzas, Psalm 119:1-8 and 9-16, serve as an introduction to the psalm, much in the same way that Psalm 1 and 2 serve as an introduction to the whole book of Psalms. The first stanza announces a blessing for obedience and contains the psalmist's commitment to obey God, the second stanza raises the issue of keeping one's ways clean.
 - The next four stanzas, move from a complaint about powerful people who conspire against him (119:17-24), to a petition for restoration (119:25-32), guidance about how to live in a sinful world (119:33-40) and a prayer for deliverance in order to show God's faithfulness to his promises (119:41-48).
 - The next stanza focuses on God's plans and provisions in the past as a basis for hope (119:49-56), and thereafter he affirms that everything belongs to God and the believer is under God's care (119:57-64). Remembering the goodness of God, the singer then desires more knowledge of God's word (119:65-72) and finishes by reminding himself that God made us and affliction is part of the LORD's plan (119:73-80).
 - A new section starts as the psalmist reaches his lowest point. He was almost overwhelmed by his affliction whilst waiting for God's help (119:81-88) but he remained faithful to God's Word, which was firmly established from all ages (119:89-96). Thus, God's Word is superior to any words of man (119:97-104) and brings light to our path (119:105-112).
 - The next four stanzas all express his confidence and loyalty. He trusts God to judge the wicked (119:113-120) and prays that God would intervene even in this world (119:121-128) and vindicate him in the eyes of those who hate God (119:129-136). He is saddened to see many who hate divine revelation but encouraged that the righteousness of the LORD will triumph (119:137-144).
 - The final four stanzas are the conclusion of the psalm. First, the psalmist prays for deliverance because he trusts the LORD (119:145-152). He prays again for vindication from God on the basis that he loves and desires to obey God's revelation (119:153-160). He explains his current affliction in some detail (119:161-168) whilst rejoicing in the peace that comes from God. The final stanza is a confession that he has not been able to completely obey God's commandments and thus he wants God to restore and deliver him (119:169-176).
- This sermon sketch will focus on Psalm 119:1-8. This first stanza is an introduction to the entire psalm, similar to how Psalm 1 introduces the whole Psalter. The repetition of the Hebrew word *ashre* (often translated "blessed") in verses 1 and 2 echoes Psalm 1:1. This stanza also includes images of walking a right path (which also echoes Psalm 1:1) and diligently keeping the LORD's statutes (vv. 4, 8). The Hebrew word *derekh* ("way") occurs in both halves of the stanza, as does the idea of keeping the LORD's directions (vv. 4, 5, 8).
- Psalm 119:1-8 can naturally be divided into two parts:

²¹ The summary of the different stanzas is taken from Ross, 2016.

- 119:1-4 - The only way of blessing is to walk the way of the LORD
- 119:5-8 – Therefore I must long to obey and walk in the ways of the LORD

Exposition

1-4: *Blessed are they whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the LORD.
Blessed are they who keep his statutes
and seek him with all their heart.
They do nothing wrong;
they walk in his ways.
You have laid down precepts
that are to be fully obeyed.*

- **Blessed.** This Hebrew word describes someone who is privileged or happy. It is connected with the idea of wisdom and the two-ways motif – the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous. The book of Psalms also begins with this same word (Psalms 1:1) and Jesus also alludes to this word in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:2-12; Luke 6:20-23)²². Happy is a better translation than blessed because today, bless often conveys the idea of doing things in order to receive something whereas happiness conveys the idea of joy, good and healthy relationship with God. Happiness not necessarily path always put a smile on face, but is path of wholeness and peace.
- **Blameless.** In the Bible, a blameless person is not someone who was perfect, even though the word derives its meaning from a Hebrew word for ‘unblemished’. To be blameless contains the idea that someone is the same on the outside as on the inside²³. It refers to integrity. Job was blameless but not sinless (Job 1:1, 8; 2:3), Zechariah and Elizabeth walked blamelessly in all the commandments of the LORD (Luke 1:6) yet Zechariah still doubted the angel (Luke 1:18-20). The has an expectation that God’s people can in some sense keep God’s law even if they cannot do so perfectly. Abraham and David, neither of them lived a perfect life yet the Bible says they obeyed God’s commandments (Genesis 26:5 and 1 Kings 3:14). They desired to obey God and as a result they were able to make a beginning in keeping God’s commandments²⁴.
- **Walk according to the law of the LORD.** This expression is meant to convey that a person is obedient to God in all aspects of his life. Someone who follows the path set out by God in his Word. Someone who builds his life on the principles articulated in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5), the same principles summarised by Jesus Christ in his answer to the Pharisees (Matthew 22:34-40).
- **Seek the LORD with all their heart.** In the Bible, the heart was not only the centre of emotions, but signified all aspects of your personhood. Your thinking, your feeling and your desires. The very core

²² Barry et. al., 2012.

²³ Ash, 2008: p24-25.

²⁴ The Heidelberg Catechism asks the question: Can those converted to God keep his commandments perfectly? No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God (Lord’s Day 44).

of your being. To seek the LORD with all your heart means to be completely occupied with finding out what God wants from you and eager to do what God says²⁵.

- **They do nothing wrong.** The Hebrew word used in this phrase likely refers to well-established patterns of wilful sinful behaviour along with a hatred of God. The psalmist is thus not suggesting that those who obey God are able to do so perfectly but that the focus of their life is on pleasing God and following his ways.
- **Precepts to be obeyed.** God has revealed to us who he is and what he expects from us in his Word²⁶. God's revelation is not something optional which we can ignore if we feel like it. God has revealed truth to us in his Word so that we can obey and live in the light of God's truth.
- **Summary.** In these first four verses of Psalm 119, the psalmist emphasises the fact that the only way of happiness is to walk in the way of the LORD. By this he does not mean that the Christian life will be without pain, struggle and times of great sadness (just read through the rest of the psalm and you will see there were many times where he struggled). What he does mean is that obedience to God's commandments is a good thing. God's commands are given for our good and we are wise when we walk in them, they will promote our happiness.

4-8: *Oh, that my ways were steadfast
in obeying your decrees!
Then I would not be put to shame
when I consider all your commands.
I will praise you with an upright heart
as I learn your righteous laws.
I will obey your decrees;
do not utterly forsake me.,*

- **Oh that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees.** Having mentioned that happiness comes to those who walk in the ways of the LORD (119:1-4), the psalmist really wants to make sure that he obeys God. He knows God's commandments are there to help him, to guide him into wise living and therefore he wants to do his best to live according to those commandments. This verse can be seen as a prayer of response to the truths which he has highlighted in the first four verses. A prayer that God would help him to be steadfast in obeying his commandments.
- **Then I would not be put to shame.** In the psalms this Hebrew word is closely related with the relationship of trust and belief between the believer and the LORD. To be removed from God or forgotten by him is shame²⁷. Similarly, in the rest of the Old Testament, shame connotes a state of being abandoned by the LORD and condemned to utter ruin, such as becomes the enemies of God (c.f. 119:31, 46, 8; Psalm 6:10; 25:2; 83:17)²⁸. There is an expectation in the heart of the psalmist that if he was to obey God, then ultimately, he would never come into a situation where he is ashamed for what he has done. There will never come a time where he looks back on decisions which he has made in his life and wishes he had done things differently. Never a time where he makes a decision that is later shown to have been foolish and wrong. This vindication will take place on the day of judgement when all mankind's deeds are exposed. On that day, those who by faith

²⁵ Ross, 2016.

²⁶ See Belgic Confession Article 2.

²⁷ NIDOTTE, 2012.

²⁸ VanGemeren, 1988.

walked in the ways of the LORD will be the ones that are vindicated for their trust in God (see Matthew 10:33; Mark 8:38; Luke 12:9).

- **I will praise you as I learn your righteous laws.** The psalmist has great respect for God's law. He considers it to be revelation from God, showing him how to live in this world. He also considers God's laws to be righteous, they are good. They give the godly a sense of order in this world²⁹. As a result, he shows his thankfulness to God for revealing his law in his Word and therefore he expects to praise God when he learns God's law.
- **Do not utterly forsake me.** This is primarily a request for God to help the psalmist in his current life situation³⁰. The psalmist hopes that by obeying God's law and building his life upon the truths of God's Word, he can be assured of God's help. In the midst of life's difficulties, the psalmist knows that the LORD's blessing generally comes to those who are obedient to him, and so he determines to keep God's commandments³¹. However, as we have seen in verse 5, the psalmist also realises that he is unable to fully obey God. He realises that as a sinful human being, there will be times in his life where he will forsake and abandon God, just as others have done (e.g. Judges 2:13-13; 2 Kings 21:22; Jeremiah 22:9; 2 Chronicles 12:1; 1 Kings 18:18). Knowing this, he pleads that the LORD will not forsake him (see also Psalm 38:21; 71:9, 18; 119:8).
- **Summary.** Knowing that happiness is only for those who walk in the ways of the LORD, the psalmist is determined to be someone that obeys God's commandments wholeheartedly. He longs to walk in God's ways but realises that he struggles to do so and therefore he needs God's help (119:5) and God's mercy for when he sins (119:8).

Key themes

- Walking in the LORD's ways is the key to blessing and happiness
- The LORD's ways are good and righteous
- Believers will long to walk in the ways of the LORD

Indicative & Application

Walking in the LORD's ways is the key to blessing and happiness

- Psalm 119 is clear that those only those who walk in God's ways are blessed (119:1-3). The focus of the psalm is thus on the practical obedience that must characterise the life of a Christian. It is not telling us that obedience is required in order to earn (or merit) salvation. Rather, it is confirming to us that obedience is the fruit or the result of salvation.
- Happiness is not found in knowledge about God's will. As important as it is to know what God expects from us, we're not happy or blessed as Christians just because we know what God says.

²⁹ VanGemeren, 1988.

³⁰ In the Old Testament, abandonment generally results in ruin, destruction and death. In a legal context, this verb refers to the end of a relationship of solidarity and trust between a group. In the psalms, the context of this word is a personal relationship of protection and solidarity with God, similar to the legal context of solidarity with a clan. Thus, it is a request for God to care for the person (TDOTOT, 1974).

³¹ Ross, 2016.

Happiness, true happiness is about practical obedience. It's not just about knowing what is right but actually walking in the right way.

- Notice how the first three verses of the psalm mentions a lot of active action words: Walk, keep, seek, doing no wrong, walk. Each one of these verbs are action words. Active words where the person does something. They are not words indicating a passive knowledge, but an active obedience.
- Similarly, verse 4 also emphasises action. God's precepts are there to be kept. God's commands are for keeping. God's revelation is meant to change the way we think and live –it's not just another opinion – God's Word is truth from God that must be obeyed. And happiness, blessing, is for those who put the knowledge of God's Word into practice. It is not for those who know what is right, it is for those who actually do what is right.
- We find this same teaching in the New Testament. In the book of James 1:22-25, we are told:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it— not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.
- This does not however mean that Christians can perfectly obey God's law. To be blameless does not mean we are perfect but that you have integrity. The examples of Job, Abraham, David, Zechariah and Elizabeth remind us that to be blameless means you are someone who tries his/her best to obey God's commandments. You are someone who lives on the outside what you believe on the inside.
- What does it then mean to walk in the ways of the LORD? Clearly it is not about perfect obedience, so what does it refer to?
- To walk in the ways of the LORD refers to the obedience that comes from faith in Jesus Christ. Job and the other individuals mentioned above all went where the law of God pointed. They were people who were conscious of their sins and failures, but they trusted that God would redeem them through his coming Messiah. They believed in the Christ who would come and thus they knew the blessing of justification by faith. And as a result, they feared the LORD and they did their best to obey him wholeheartedly.
- There is no other way to blessing, no other way to happiness, than a life which is wholeheartedly focused upon the LORD and walking in his ways. If we seek the LORD, we must walk where he walks. The way of the Word is the way of the LORD. There is a need for holiness in the lives of Christians. The Christian life is not a ticket to heaven whereby we watch Christ, say thanks and then just continue to indulge our sinful desires as if nothing has changed, continue to live as if God has not spoken to us in his Word. No, the Christian life is a call to follow Christ, a call to walk in his ways (Mark 8:34-38).
- In the Heidelberg Catechism we confess that even though in this life even the holiest of believers have only a small beginning of obedience to God's commandments. Nevertheless, with earnest purpose, all those who truly belong to God, all those who are true Christian believers, they will all begin to live not only according to some but all the commandments of God³².

³² See Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 44.

- Do not deceive yourself into thinking that you love God and belong to him if you have no interest at all in keeping his commandments. Don't think that your baptism or conversion is a ticket to heaven that excuses you from obedience to God's commandments. The LORD makes his ways known in his Word so that we can walk in them and be happy.

The LORD's ways are good and righteous

- Psalm 119:18 also encourages us to think positively about God's commandments. The ways of the LORD are good and righteous.
- We can often fall into the trap of thinking in God's law only in a negative manner. There are parts of the Bible which mention how the law brings knowledge of sin and is unable to make us right in God's sight (Romans 3:20-21; 7:7). However, for the people living in the Old Testament, God's laws were a great joy and delight for two reasons:
 - Clear revelation: If you lived in the ancient Near East at the time when this psalm was written, your non-Christian friends and neighbours would all be worshipping pagan gods. And these pagan gods were very temperamental, constantly changing their demands, you never knew where you stood with them. You never knew what they wanted and you certainly didn't know how you were meant to live in order to enjoy this world for all its worth. But in the Bible, God has clearly and plainly made his will known to his people. In the words of Psalm 32, he teaches us the way we should go. He shows us how to live. We don't have to discover the key to happiness by ourselves. There is a danger that we can be so used to having the Bible as God's revelation that we can forget the wonder of what we hold in our hands. Every time we open these pages of Scripture and read from them we are listening to God. We are hearing from the God who made us. This is a wonderful testimony to God's grace that he would reveal himself to us even though by nature we are sinful people who want nothing to do with him³³!
 - Covenant origins: The laws of God also find their origin in God's covenant promises. The ways of the LORD are given to God's people after God's promises have already been made. First God promised to be the God of Abraham and his descendants. Then God acted to rescue his people from slavery. Then God gave them his teaching about how they must live. Remember the words of the Ten Commandments begin in this way: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery". Thus, God's laws come to us not only to reveal our sin (Romans 3:20-21; 7:7) and point us to Christ, but they are also there to show us how to live as people of the covenant. How to live in response to God's grace.
- The Heidelberg Catechism helpfully summarises the three purposes of God's law in Lord's Day 44. God's law is given so that...the longer we live the more we may come to know our sinfulness and the more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness. Also, so that we may never stop striving, and never stop praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, to be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection.

³³ See Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 2-4.

Believers will long to walk in the ways of the LORD

- Knowing that God's Word is there to direct our lives, to lead us into happiness, to show us how to live in this world, it's no surprise that the psalmist would go on to pray for God's help. Indeed doctrine, knowledge about God, must always lead to prayer. And so, we find the psalmist making this impassioned plea in verse 5: *Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!*
- In the next three verses, 119:6-9, he expands on this desire:
 - (6) If only, I was able to obey God's commandments, then I would never be ashamed. There will never come a time where I look back on my life and wish I had done things differently. Never a time where I make a decision that is later shown to have been foolish and wrong.
 - (7) If only, I was able to obey God's commandments, then I would praise God with an upright heart. You know how often we can be half-hearted in our praise of God because in our lives we are not busy striving to obey his Word. We're indulging a secret sin which makes us feel far from God. Yet when we confess our sins, when we repent of them and truly strive to honour God, joyful praise comes much more easily to our lips.
 - (8) If only I was able to obey God's commandments, then I will never be forsaken. I won't be shown to be a fraud on the day of judgement, a goat among the sheep, someone who cried 'Lord, Lord as I prophesied in Jesus name, casting out demons and doing wonders' only to hear the dreadful words 'I never knew you; depart from me, you worker of lawlessness' (Matthew 7:21-23).
- The psalmist realises that God needs to work in him if he is going to persevere and walk in God's ways³⁴. But he's scared that if he was left to himself, he would simply ignore God and continue on the path of sin. Therefore, he pleads with the LORD to work in him through his Spirit, to help him grow in practical obedience. The LORD, Jesus Christ, is his Saviour, and now he longs to please him in all that he does.
- The psalmist's words are the words of someone that has true faith³⁵. Not only a knowledge about God's will, but a humble desire to honour and obey God. These are the words of someone who knows his sins are forgiven and yet still asks for God's help and guidance, still pleads in a sense for forgiveness.
- We must be careful today that we do not hide behind our theology. We know that no one can obey God perfectly³⁶. We know that obedience cannot justify or make us righteous in God's sight³⁷ and that Christ will keep us if we truly belong to him³⁸. But we cannot use those truths to excuse our sinfulness. God's Word encourages us, knowing that we are freely justified before God through faith in Christ³⁹, to nonetheless make every effort in the here and the now to live holy lives. Indeed, without holiness, no one will see the LORD (Hebrews 12:14).

³⁴ See Canons of Dort, fifth main point of doctrine.

³⁵ For a clear biblical definition of true faith, see the Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 7.

³⁶ See Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 2.

³⁷ See Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 24.

³⁸ See Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 21.

³⁹ See Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 23.

Christocentric focus

- Psalms which focus on celebrating God's divine kingship over creation (e.g. Psalm 29), God's active role in redemption (e.g. Psalm 105) and God's rule over the earth (e.g. Psalm 2 & Psalm 8) can be interpreted as psalms which are sung **about** Jesus Christ. The New Testament identifies Christ as our Creator and Redeemer (Colossians 1:15-22). He is the LORD⁴⁰.
- Psalms which focus on asking God for help (lament such as Psalm 58), thanking God for his help (thanksgiving such as Psalm 136) and contemplating God's covenant (wisdom such as Psalm 1) can be interpreted as psalms which are sung **by** Jesus Christ. Christ is the one who has gone before us singing the laments for us (he suffered much more than we ever could), Christ leads us in songs of thanksgiving for God's work of redemption and Christ encourages us to live with confidence before God just as Christ was confident on the cross⁴¹.
- Psalm 119 should can be interpreted as a psalm which is ultimately sung by Jesus Christ. He is the only truly blameless person who ever lived. He is the one who walked in God's ways wholeheartedly and never did anything wrong (Luke 23:41). Therefore, in this psalm, we see the desires that characterised the heart of Jesus Christ. A desire to obey God's Word. A love for God's law. Jesus Christ leads us in singing this psalm in the first place by showing us the desires in his heart so that God the Holy Spirit can work those same desires into our hearts (Colossians 3:15-17).
- Jesus Christ also leads us in singing this psalm by reminding us that he lived the perfect life on our behalf and bore the penalty for our sin so that we can be assured of God's blessing and that God will never forsake us⁴². Because his perfect life is imputed to me, I can be sure of receiving God's blessing, the blessing promised for those who walk in God's ways. Because he paid penalty for my sin in his death, I can also be assured that I will never be forsaken by God.

Sermon suggestions

Theme

- The LORD makes his ways known in his Word so that we can walk in them and be happy

Goal

- The purpose of Psalm 119 is to encourage believers to practical godliness and holiness of life in response to God's promises and revelation. Thus, the sermon must aim to achieve the same goal. It must encourage God's people to realise that God's law is there for our good (happiness) and that we must walk in God's way (practical, active obedience)

One God in three persons:

- What does Psalm 119:1-8 reveal about who God is (Father)?

⁴⁰ In Matthew 3:3, Jesus Christ is identified as the LORD that Isaiah prophesied about (Isaiah 40:3). John the Baptist has to prepare the way for Jesus Christ. The King who sits on the throne (Psalm 29:10) is the Lord Jesus Christ who humbled himself and became obedient to death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-11).

⁴¹ Futato, 2007.

⁴² See Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 23.

- God the Father is shown to provide laws for his people so that they can share in his ways. God is thus not silent and hidden away from the world. He has made himself known, he has revealed himself and his desires in his Word.
- What does Psalm 119:1-8 reveal about what God does in my place and on my behalf (Son)?
 - God the Son perfectly walks in God's ways in my place so that I do not have to be forsaken by God because of my sins. He also leads me in singing this song by showing me what his desires and emotions are. Thus, he sings this song on my behalf but also calls me to sing it with him to the praise of God the Father.
- What does Psalm 114 reveal about what God does in me and through me (Holy Spirit)?
 - God the Holy Spirit works in me so that the desires of my heart will change to be like the desires of Christ's heart, so that I will also long to walk in God's ways. He also empowers me so that even now I can begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God.

Suggested sermon outline

I Introduction

How can I make the most of my life in this year to come? How can I be blessed or happy? How can I live in a way that is wise and not foolish?

God has made us, he is the one who knows what is best for us, and so it only makes sense that if we want to live healthy and happy lives, then we must live in a way that is consistent with his revelation.

That is a very simple message, but it is hard message to believe and even more difficult to build your life on this truth.

As a result, most of our society, our friends and family, will tell us to look for true happiness and meaning somewhere else (give examples, e.g. You must honour the ancestors, you must follow your dreams, etc.)

II True happiness is found by walking in the ways of the LORD

- A Not knowledge, but practical obedience
- B Not perfection, but integrity
- C Yes, Christ alone perfectly obeyed and we are made right in God's sight through faith in him
- D True faith will be evident in obedience
- E God's law is there to guide us and show us how to live, it is for our good

III I need to long to walk in the ways of the LORD

- A Psalmist's desires must also be my desire because it is the desire of Jesus Christ
- B I must pray and ask for God's help to obey him
- C Knowledge of God's truth must show itself in practical obedience or it is useless

V Conclusion

May God who has made us part of his covenant people, adopting us into his family and showing us how to live through his law, may he help us through his Holy Spirit so that we will desire to obey him and

walk in his ways, so that we might enjoy the happiness that comes from obeying him, so that we won't be ashamed and make wise decisions in this life to the glory of Jesus Christ our King

Singing the psalms

- The psalms were given to us by God for singing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). They are not just meant for reading and studying, but they are meant to be sung and prayed by Christians, even today. Psalms are one of the means that God the Holy Spirit uses to reshape and change the desires of our heart so that we will desire the things that God wants us to desire.
- Singing Psalm 119 helps us to see how Jesus Christ's love for God's law and his desire to obey it. We sing this psalm praying that God the Holy Spirit would work those same desires into our hearts and minds.
- A sing-able English language version of Psalm 119:1-8 is available [here](#). The recommended tune is [APPLETON](#). It can also be sung on the famous 'OLD 100th'.

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