



Introduction

The Essence of Bible Delight

Oh, how I love your instruction!
All the day it is my meditation.
(Ps. 119:97)



The purpose of this book is to stimulate Bible delight among Bible teachers and Bible hearers. Specifically, my aim is to persuade those of us who teach and preach the Bible that we can only do so faithfully when we ourselves are thrilled with what we teach, and further that our aim ought to be to stimulate the same delight in our hearers. That is to say, we preach out of Bible delight in our own hearts and for Bible delight in our hearers' souls. To put it negatively, if we preach out of what Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to call 'ossified orthodoxy', then we will breed that same ossified orthodoxy in our hearers.

If someone asks you or me, 'Do you love the Bible?' we might reply - if we are Christians - 'Well, I know that I ought to love it. But to be honest I am not sure that I do. My Bible reading is more a matter of duty than delight. I wish it were a delight, but all too often it is a chore.' If so, Psalm 119 is for you. If you are not a Christian believer, that may sound a stupid question. 'Of course not,' you may respond. Perhaps you love the Bible as literature. But I am not talking about loving the Bible as literature. I am talking about loving the Bible for its

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substance. If you want to know why Christians love the Bible, you cannot do better than to start with Psalm 119.

It is especially for you if, like me, you have a high view of the Bible. We are persuaded that the Bible is trustworthy. We believe it is the word of God himself. Perhaps we are happy to speak of it as 'inspired', even 'infallible' or 'inerrant'. And yet even for us, until and unless we love the Bible and find it a delight, our view of the Bible is too low. There are hints in the psalm that the singer was what we would call a Bible teacher. For example, in verse 79 he prays that 'those who fear' God will 'turn' to him in order to 'know your testimonies'. It is unsurprising that one who could compose this remarkable psalm would be employed in teaching the word of God. If so, it is a challenging example of the heart of Bible delight that ought to beat in our own Bible teaching.

On the common where we used to walk our dog there is a golf course. Beside one fairway we came across one of those benches donated in memory of someone. I forget the name of this man, so let us call him Fred. The bench simply read, 'To Fred, who loved his golf.' I was a little sad that this was the best they could think to say about Fred. But presumably he did love his golf. And I imagine they knew he loved his golf because he played it so much. What he played showed what he loved. His sport was his delight.

If I were to ask you, 'Do you play with your Bible?' you might be surprised, even offended. 'No,' you might say, 'the Bible is much too serious to play with.' But there is another way of looking at it. As the legendary Liverpool football manager Bill Shankly famously said, 'Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I'm very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.' And, joking apart, what we play may not be trivial at all. After all, they knew that Isaac was married to Rebekah because he was seen playing or sporting with her in a way that only made sense if she was his delight (Gen. 26:8, 9).



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As we read and pray through Psalm 119 we keep company with one who delighted in his Bible. Bible delight is the heartbeat of this psalm. We might even say that he plays with Bible words, as he turns from one word to another in an elaborate poetic playfulness. More than twenty-five times he says he delights in the word of God, or loves and longs for the word of God. To him it is delicious (v. 103) and delightful. As he reads it he keeps stumbling across treasure (v. 162). It is his hope, his peace, his joy, his song, his freedom and his comfort.

He had much less of the Bible than we do. Certainly he had no New Testament. Probably he didn't have all our Old Testament. We don't know who wrote the psalm, or when. But he loved his shorter Bible. From his psalm we may learn the logic and the dynamics of Bible delight. I pray that as we learn to sing his psalm, we too may learn to love our complete and even richer Bibles, and that our hearts will beat in time with his, the heartbeat of Bible delight.

CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE AND THE PSALMS

Before we launch in to Psalm 119, let us take a step back from Bible delight to think about Christian experience more generally. What does it *feel* like to be a believer? When someone asks, 'How are you?' what do you say? Most of us reply, if we are below a certain age, 'I'm good, thanks' (although as a cultural dinosaur I think it would be more correct to say, 'I'm well, thanks!'). But sometimes I feel like the girl in a recent mobile 'phone advertisement. She is on her mobile, and a friend asks, 'How are things with Mike?' Her face crumples and she replies, 'How long have you got?' (and how glad she is of her free minutes). 'How are you?' 'How long have you got?' In any group of Christians, that kind of honesty would unlock a flood of Christian experience told as it actually is, and not as we would like to pretend it is.

What does the Christian life feel like? What ought it to feel like? What is authentic Christian experience? This question

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is important for assurance, lest we worry that our experience shows we are not Christian at all. It is important for our expectations, so that we do not give up when the going gets tough. It is important for evangelism, so that we tell people honestly the life into which we invite them. It is important for stability, otherwise we are always worrying that we are missing out, that if only we read this book, or went on that course, or attended the other conference, or somehow got ourselves to where the latest wind of doctrine was blowing, well, then we would feel alright at last. So it is an important question: what does the Christian life feel like?

One of the great functions of the Psalms is to shape our ragged emotions and desires, so that we not only think as we ought to think, but also feel as we ought to feel and long as we ought to long. If we are familiar with the doctrine of Total Depravity we will know that this important doctrine does not teach that we are all as bad as we could possibly be; that would be absurd and make it impossible to account for self-sacrifice, virtue, honesty, kindness, and goodness in all sorts of people. The doctrine of Total Depravity means that every part and facet of our human personhood is touched and tainted by sin, including our desires and feelings. When we moved into one house my wife bought two wooden flower tubs. They had been made by sawing an old whisky barrel in two. She asked me to drill drainage holes in them. And as I bored into the wood with my bit and brace, there was an unmistakable whiff of whisky. The whisky had seeped into every fibre of the wood. Wherever you drilled, you would find it. In the same way human sin has seeped into every fibre of human personhood. Our minds, our hearts, our feelings, our bodies, our desires, all alike are impregnated with sin. And this includes our feelings: we do not feel as we ought to feel. Sometimes we are happy at others' misfortune, or sad at their success. We do not want what we ought to want; our loves are disordered. We love what we ought to hate, and we shun what we ought to desire.

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The Psalms give us authorised, authentic response to God and his word. We learn in them not only what he has said to us (the word of God coming down); we learn also how we may and ought to respond (the word of God going back up). The Psalms are therefore of great practical importance in the Christian life, and a vital protection against imbalance. In past ages, those who called themselves 'evangelical' were derided as 'enthusiasts' (e.g. by Mgr. Ronald Knox in his famous book *Enthusiasm*); we were thought to be too emotional at the expense of the intellect. Now it is the reverse. Since the advent of the charismatic movement in the 1960's some of us may look askance at some of the excesses of that movement. We want to say to our charismatic friends (in love!), 'You are too focused on experience, and therefore you are not stable, you follow every new fad, you are not breeding maturity, you are characterized by superficiality.' But in response they may say to us (also in love!), 'We may be too focused on experience. But to listen to some of you preach and speak, it does not seem to us that you have any emotions at all, or any real experience of the living God!'

Too often this conversation is a dialogue of the deaf. I want to suggest that a thoughtful, sensitive, and theological restoration of the Psalms into Christian prayer and praise may provide God's way forward. For the Psalms perfectly combine thought and feeling, theology and prayer, emotion and reality, the subjective and the objective. In particular, Psalm 119 can inject into the heartbeat of Christian experience the passionate and reasonable delight in the written word of God.

LEARNING TO SING THIS PSALM (HOW TO USE THIS BOOK)

I have been challenged by this description of one seventeenth-century minister who preached 190 sermons on Psalm 119. A contemporary wrote that he 'writes like one that knew the singer's heart, and felt in his own the sanctifying power of what he wrote.' His sermons began with the understanding, dealt with the affections, but drove purposefully towards the promo-

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tion of practical holiness. ‘They come to the conscience; first presenting us a mirror, in which we may view the spots of our souls, and then directing us to that fountain in which we may wash them away.’

This book has the same aim of promoting joyful holiness. It is intended to be a pathway into Psalm 119. The psalm has inexhaustible riches. Every time I come back to it I notice new things. This little book is meant to help us get started in singing it. I hope it may be a helpful first word on the way in; but please don’t expect it to be the last.

I take it that my task is more like that of a singing teacher than a biology teacher. A biology teacher can instruct us how to dissect. But, as has been said, ‘we murder to dissect’. And a psalm is not just to be analysed. It is for the music room, not the mortuary. If I am a singing teacher, I need to do three things.

First, I need to instruct so that we understand the lyrics. This will involve understanding key words such as ‘steadfast love’ in their Old Testament context.

Second, I need to teach the tune (metaphorically) so that we feel it as we sing; we are moved and touched by it as well as instructed by it. For this psalm is thick with emotions. It is not flat, grey, or bland, but full of churnings of strong passion.

And, third, I need to motivate so that not only can we sing it, but we want to sing it from the heart.

My task is therefore didactic (teaching the meaning), affectional (tuning in to the feeling) and volitional (moving the will to join in). Some skip the hard work of understanding and go straight to the feelings. The result is fluff, words sung with gusto but the mind not engaged. Others, however, work hard at understanding but never get as far as singing. I have been guilty of this myself. We study the psalm and work hard at its cognitive content; but we are not moved by it. And so we do not join in.



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But we must join in. For this psalm opens for us a window into a world where the people of God love the word of God. It invites us not just to look in through the window as into a strange world, but to climb in, to enter this world and live in it, as we too sing the psalm. So, as we read, let us ask ourselves three questions.

Do I understand it (the didactic question)?

Can I feel it (the affectional question)?

Am I willing to sing it (the volitional question)?

Because the psalm is for singing, instead of calling the writer ‘the psalmist’ (as a commentary would usually do), I am going to call him or her ‘the singer’ as a reminder to us that they sing in order that we may join in the song.

I suggest you use this book and my literal translation as a guide to walk with you through the psalm, perhaps over a period of 22 days (one day per section), or even 22 weeks (giving longer to meditate on each section). You might want to use it as a guide for a Bible study group or reading group. Whatever you do, guard time for prayerful response to the psalm, not only to understand it but to sing it from the heart. I have given a couple of personal response questions at the end of each chapter to help with this.





1

Getting our Bearings in Psalm 119

Why do we find the psalm so hard to sing?



Psalm 119 is by some way the longest psalm in the Bible. My fascination with it began before I was a Christian. When I was a spotty teenager, I used to stand all too early in the morning in school chapel, with about 650 other teenagers. And an impossibly enthusiastic Director of Music would train us to chant psalms. I know that shows what a dinosaur I am, but it is true. He did a good job, musically. And when we were not too sullen, we sang quite well. But it was the triumph of his enthusiasm over our incomprehension, because we had no idea what they meant, all those statutes and precepts and repetitions. And it was so long. I wondered how it could be so long, and how long chapel would last if the chaplain forgot to tell us only to sing one or two sections; if by mistake we were to sing it all, we should certainly miss Physics, and probably French as well.

After I came to a real Christian faith, my fascination with this psalm continued. As Everest to a climber, so Psalm 119 in the Psalter lures us because it is there. But it puzzled me too. How is it that he delights not just in the word of God in general, but in the law of God in particular? I learned that the law brought knowledge of sin and that the righteousness

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of God became known apart from law (Rom. 3:20, 21; 7:7). I was taught that the law even provokes us into sin, and that sin springs to life when triggered by law (Rom. 7:7-9). I read that the law was a heavy yoke on the neck of disciples, very hard to bear (Acts 15:10). Altogether the law didn't seem a very good thing. I was not expected to delight in the law, but rather to delight that we are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:15). In the words of the old hymn,

The terrors of Law and of God,
with me can have nothing to do.
My Saviour's obedience and blood,
hide all my transgressions from view.

And so I couldn't work out why he loves this law, why it is sweet to his taste, and so on. What is going on? This is a problem for us. And unless we solve this problem, there is no way we shall be able to sing this psalm. The solution is outlined in the chapter headed 'Getting our Bearings (B)' below. And it is important, because we must learn to sing the psalm.

Before we address the theological problem of the law, I want to address two other problems. These concern the kind of psalm that Psalm 119 is, its style and genre. I want to encourage us to sing the psalm as it is written, and not just to adopt 'the nugget strategy' or 'the theme strategy'. Most Christians begin with 'the nugget strategy' in Psalm 119. Here we treat the psalm as a mine for nuggets of spiritual gold. We wander or dig through the psalm until some verse catches our eye. When it does, we extract that verse and put it in our collection of spiritual valuables. Perhaps 'the entrance of your word gives light' (v. 130) or 'your word is a lamp to my feet' (v. 105). They are great nuggets. This strategy is a start. But if we stop with nuggets, we imply that the 'non-nugget' parts might as well be tossed into the scriptural skip.

It is perhaps a step forward to take themes and trace them through the psalm. So, for example, we might consider the

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theme of suffering and study that. But even with this strategy we seem to imply that God would have done better to inspire a collection of thematic studies rather than the psalm as it is.

I think there are two reasons we are reluctant to learn to sing it as a raw psalm in the form in which we have it. First, we find it repetitive. And second, we find it incoherent. Let us take repetition first. The psalm certainly does repeat. About half a dozen times he prays, 'Teach me your statutes'. Many times he prays, 'Give me life ...' (vv. 17, 25, 37, 40, 50, etc). And there is much other repetition. But why shouldn't there be repetition? We need to repent of impatience, and to remember that one man's repetitiveness is another man's integrity and emphasis.

Besides, it does not repeat in a wooden way. This is not the mind-numbing repetition of a jingle from 'Greensleeves' played by the ice-cream van as it stops outside our house day by day (and it always cuts out in the middle; and it's always the same jingle; and it drives me mad!). Rather this is 'a theme and variations'. And as we sing around the theme, we stay on the same central theme, but we see it from fresh angles. And we find ourselves saying, 'I had never quite seen *that* about the word of God.' So there is a freshness about it. It is a little like walking around a beautiful statue with an expert guide. So our singer points out feature after feature of the word of God to help us appreciate more fully the wonder of the whole. I need this kind of varied repetition to get through my thick skull and soften my hard heart. So let us not worry about repetition. Let us savour the repetition and not resent it. God knows that we need it.

But what about incoherence? We might as well admit that we find it disconnected and therefore hard to study, let alone sing. Like some other psalms (e.g. 25, 34) and four of the poems of Lamentations, it is an acrostic. (Ps. 119 is the most elaborate acrostic in the Old Testament.) Each verse in the first section of eight verses begins with *aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse in the second section begins with the next letter, *beth*. And so on through all 22 letters of the alphabet.

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It is often supposed that this formal structure acts like a straightjacket inhibiting any coherence of meaning. Just as in a child's alphabet book there is no link of meaning between Bird, Bat, and Bacon, so, we say, each eight-verse section is an unconnected jumble of pious thoughts. And just as there is no logical development from Apple to Bat and then Cat, so between sections the psalm as a whole is disconnected. The psalm, we think, has formal shape at the expense of logical meaning.

But this is a poor argument. We might as well say that a rhyming poem must necessarily be nonsense verse, or that alliterative sermon headings are bound to be forced. But we all know that in the hands of a skilled practitioner a rhyming poem may be deeply coherent, the form working together with the content in an ordered whole. The same may even be true for some alliterative sermon points (though not all!).

The poet who wrote this psalm was a very skilled practitioner. The psalm is full of connections. He is a Hebrew poet, and therefore he loves parallelism. Again and again there are connections between adjacent verses, or between groups of verses in fours (typically the first four and the second four of an eight). Sometimes adjacent sections of eight are linked in topic. And sometimes the final verse of an eightsome acts as a climax or summary of the section. The psalm has all the marks of a fruitful and ordered mind.

More significantly, Christian experience does not run in straight lines. No matter how logical we may be, we do not experience God as the stages of a mathematical proof. A psalm that never went round and round and back again might be easier to analyse; but it would be very hard to sing from a real human heart. So let us go with the flow of the psalm, respect its genre, and sing it as it is written.

I make no claim that the particular themes I have identified in each section are all that is there. The psalm contains inexhaustible riches. But I hope that I have made at least a passable case for identifying the themes that I have discerned. I hope



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my comments may at least help get you started on your own studies.

While these obstacles of structure and form are real, they are dwarfed by the puzzle of substance with which we began. How can we, who are Christian believers under the New Covenant, be expected to sing this psalm of delight in the Old Covenant Law of God? I believe that the first two sections of the psalm address this puzzle. We shall consider the first section (vv. 1-8) and then consider the theological puzzle of the Law as we lead into the second section (vv. 9-16).

