

## PSALM 119: 1-16

- <sup>1</sup> Happy are those whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the LORD.
- <sup>2</sup> Happy are those who keep God's decrees,  
who seek God with their whole heart,  
<sup>3</sup> who also do no wrong,  
but walk in God's ways.
- <sup>4</sup> You have commanded your precepts  
to be kept diligently.
- <sup>5</sup> O that my ways may be steadfast  
in keeping your statutes!
- <sup>6</sup> Then I shall not be put to shame,  
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
- <sup>7</sup> I will praise you with an upright heart,  
when I learn your righteous ordinances.
- <sup>8</sup> I will observe your statutes;  
do not utterly forsake me.
- <sup>9</sup> How can young people keep their way pure?  
By guarding it according to your word.
- <sup>10</sup> With my whole heart I seek you;  
do not let me stray from your commandments.
- <sup>11</sup> I treasure your word in my heart,  
so that I may not sin against you.
- <sup>12</sup> Blessed are you, O LORD;  
teach me your statutes.
- <sup>13</sup> With my lips I declare  
all the ordinances of your mouth.
- <sup>14</sup> I delight in the way of your decrees  
as much as in all riches.
- <sup>15</sup> I will meditate on your precepts,  
and fix my eyes on your ways.
- <sup>16</sup> I will delight in your statutes;  
I will not forget your word.

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the collection – a whole 176 verses! Why so long? Because each stanza begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet – 22 stanzas for all 22 letters. This is called an acrostic, and it offers a complete meditation on a specific theme.

What is the theme? “Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.” This psalm, like psalms 1, 19 and a few others, focus on the “law” of the Lord, the

“commandments” the “precepts”, “ordinances”, “statutes” and “decrees”. Many of us have heard of the 10 commandments (Exodus 20). But there are many more specific laws throughout the Older Testament, especially through the early books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Some of these laws are dated, and they are culturally and socially specific to the world of that time and the situation of the Hebrews at that time (the middle east of 3000 years ago). The danger for readers of scripture is reading such laws as if they are eternally and universally true. What’s eternal and universal is love, and love is manifested for these people in their faith in a God whose love for them is so steadfast, God will accompany them through the thick and thin, and for as long as it takes for them to heal from the multi-generational trauma of brutal enslavement. In summarizing the law centuries later, Jesus states the law explicitly as love: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and you shall love you neighbour as yourself.” (Mark 12: 30-31). Laws that are truly divine are rooted in love even as they are specific for their time, place and situation.

Ok, but the next question is this: How does following the law of God, the law of love, as “blamelessly” as we can (that is: with intention and commitment and a regular reset of forgiveness when we fail to love well); how can such a following of the law lead to “happiness”? Unfortunately, the word “happy” in our modern North American culture is often understood more superficially as tied to things going our way in our lives when it comes to our love life, family, work, finances and health. Of course all these things are super important and central to our happiness as human beings. But the biblical word “Happy” is more like the kind of wellness and wholeness in our souls that grows when we pass through the dark valley of failure, hurt and discouragement as much, if not more so, than when we have those mountain top high feelings of gratitude for all the success and good fortune in our lives.

In fact, if you read the rest of the psalm (all 176 verses!) you will see some repeated themes. There are many temptations that can make the psalmist, like any of us, falter, especially when people and circumstances around us are anything but loving or kind. And so, if following the law of love is done out of a sheer calculus of what we get to benefit us in tangible terms compared to what we have to put into it, it will not work. The law of love can only bring internal blessing for us if we follow it with our hearts, and with a desire in us that’s deeper than any other desire. To love with all our heart and soul must be it’s own end and goal. No matter what the outcome and no matter what comes to us externally to challenge us, we are made out of love and for love and only a law that is rooted in love deserves our heart and soul adherence, devotion and commitment.

We may not get through all 176 verses of this psalm in one go. But we will get the message through every stanza. “Happy are those who keep God’s decrees, who seek God with their whole heart... who walk in God’s ways... O that my way be steadfast in keeping your statutes... I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.” May it be so in our hearts and lives, O God!

**PRAYER:** We want it, O God. We want love to be our deepest desire, our driver and motivator in all we do and with all whom we interact. Whether we are angry or sad, struggling to discern our way ahead, seeking new purpose at a new stage and age in our lives and our relationships, or whether we are looking to unload and let go much we are carrying so that we find greater peace in our lives, we ask you, O God, to ground us in your love. Your love is a love that is real, solid, discerning, wise, and able to distinguish concern from contempt, and a desire for justice from a desire to hurt as we have been hurt. Walk with us and move through us this day and this week, O God, so that your love finds a way to win in us... In Jesus' name; Amen.