

PSALM 119:1-8

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 21-23, 2019

Smith

GOD'S WORD IS A LAMP TO MY FEET

- ¹ Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD.**
- ² Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart—**
- ³ they do no wrong but follow his ways.**
- ⁴ You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.**
- ⁵ Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!**
- ⁶ Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands.**
- ⁷ I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws.**
- ⁸ I will obey your decrees; do not utterly forsake me.**

When your pastors come before you in worship as I am before today, as a rule, we come in one of three outfits. Sometimes we come in you might call our “Church clothes,” without any gown, but dressed for worship. Most often we come in the white gown called an “alb,” the historic and most ancient vestment of a gospel minister. And sometimes, because of the historic church year or if worship, especially a funeral, continues outdoors in certain weather, we come in the heavy black gown.

We can think of the Means of Grace in a similar way. The Means of Grace is the way the Gospel comes to us, in three “outfits.” And the one gospel comes in the word of God without any outfit—and yet clearly set aside as something holy and for a worshipful purpose (as when a pastor leads worship without a robe), or in the two sacraments, dressed in the cleansing water of baptism, or in the forgiving body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper.

Here in our Psalm, the word of God is held up in its role as a Means of Grace. It is the comfort of God’s grace, God’s gracious compassion, applied to God’s people.

This is an interesting Psalm, worth our study over the course of our lives. An author is not given, but we know a few things about the author based on the text. He has a deep knowledge of the word of God and the language of God’s word, and this probably points to a man educated as a Levite or even as a Priest. He is extremely well-versed in Hebrew poetry, and he quotes at least two other Psalms and reflects the language of many more -- therefore we can say with confidence that he lived at a time after King David, probably during the days when Judah and Israel were divided.

Since he talks about being surrounded by enemies of the word of God, and since he never mentions the temple, the altar, or the courts of the Lord, I think it’s possible or probable that he was serving in the north, in Samaria, at a time when he expected to be delivered from oppression; perhaps in the days of the first King of the Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam I, but this

is only my guess and can't be proved from the text. What we can say for certain is that he was surrounded by many opponents to the Word of God, and by many temptations to abandon the Word of God for something else.

You might already know that at 176 verses, it is the longest Psalm and longest chapter of the Bible. It is written in an impressive alphabetic style, so that in each of the 22 sections, every line of every section begins with the same successive letter of the Hebrew Alphabet: Here in the first section, each line begins with "Aleph," similar in some ways to our letter A; in verse 9-16, it's the letter "B," and so on. And the theme of the whole Psalm is often given as "The Great Psalm Praising the Word of God."

The Psalmist is concerned about the way his life measures up to God's standards. He knows what God demands of us, and he knows what his life is like, how he has sinned in his actions, sinned with his words, sinned even in his thoughts. In this way, he is just like us.

The two halves of this section, which we would call a stanza, reflect one another: In verses 1-4, God's ways are described. In verses 5-8, the author yearns for his ways to match God's ways. How is it possible for our ways to follow God's ways, when we are so sinful? Especially when we're reminded in our text that God's way, God's word, is to be followed "fully," without a mistake, that we are to be steadfast and unwavering in our faith, and that God is to be obeyed. How hard this hits us!

I like to play chess, but I've always struggled with checkers. Then, just a few months ago, this deficiency bothered me so much that I located a copy of the rules of checkers, and I found out that most people don't actually play according to the rules, especially the one that says: If a player can jump and capture an opposing piece, that player must make that move. I talked to a couple of opponents about this, and they all agree, they don't follow that rule. And we do the same thing with the law of God. We like to pick and choose which commands we will follow, and when we will follow them. But when we set aside any of God's commands, we sin. We pile up a mound of guilt all on our account, and it grows and grows every day, into a mountain, and then into a whole mountain range of guilt, all bearing our name. No wonder our Psalm cries out, "Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!"

What is the solution to our guilt? It is the solution the Psalm presents: "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless." To be blessed is nothing less than to receive every blessing from God, beginning with the forgiveness of our sins, and continuing with access to God's holy word and the faith which apprehends his word, and the certainty of eternal life and salvation in heaven. It cannot be anything less. How could God ever give a portion of these things without giving them all?

There is a little prayer at the end of verse 8: “Do not utterly forsake me.” God hasn’t forsaken us. It might have looked that way to our author. His life may have seemed so dismal, surrounded as he seemingly was by sinners and opponents, people who rejected the word of God and claimed to be ashamed of the word of God. But he knew the promises of God.

Beginning with Moses in Genesis, the Word of God—the unadorned Means of Grace—proclaims and keeps on proclaiming the love and grace of God for all who put their trust in him. The promise came to Abraham, to his son Isaac, to his son Jacob, and on and on through the prophets and the Psalmists, even like the one before us today: God loves his people and God has rescued his people; God cherishes his people and has done everything necessary to free us from our burden of guilt and to assure us that we have a place with him forever in heaven.

It is as if the true singers of every love song was Christ and his Church: the eternal love of our Lord and Savior for his darling and beloved people, and our loving response and longing for the day when we will be together forever.

*Forever and ever, you’ll stay in my heart and I will love you
Forever and ever, we never will part Oh How I love you, together forever...
(and that’s how it will really be for us -- without ending)^a*

But today? We still pray: “Oh, that my ways were steadfast.” We know we still walk in the swamp of our sins. We pray that Jesus would lift us up out of the muck and onto the path his righteousness. And our Psalm gives us a little word for encouragement. The Holy Spirit guided the writer to say, in verse 7, “I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws.” That little word, “as,” reminds us that living for the Lord, living a life of faith and putting your faith into action, is a process. It’s a path we walk.

Being saved? That’s already done. Don’t be nervous about heaven; your receipt is tucked away in your Bible at John 19:30 with the words, “It is finished,” which means “Paid in full.” But while you wait in line with the rest of us here below, know that the Holy Spirit is working in you every day, to follow our Savior more closely, to watch his footsteps more precisely; to learn to show our love with more thanks and generosity. He does it through the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament -- the Gospel in its three outfits. And the Spirit keeps on doing this for us day by day by day. Amen.

^a “Say a Little Prayer” (Bacharach & David; Dionne Warwick, 1967).

