

The Way of Falsehood and the Way of Faithfulness (Psalm 119:25-32)

Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School | 25 August 2024

David Rivas

Introduction & Review

Form

As we have covered in previous lessons, a defining feature of Psalm 119 is that it is an acrostic poem. The Hebrew alphabet consists of 22 letters, and this psalm contains 22 sections of eight verses each. Each one of the 22 sections is given a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and each line in that section begins with that letter.

Today we come to the fourth section, Daleth, where every line begins with the Hebrew consonant Daleth. Five of the eight lines in this section begin not only with the same letter, but also with the same word, “way” (*derek*). According to Hywel Jones, “This is due to the constraints of the acrostic arrangement and the fact that relatively few Hebrew words begin with this letter. Even so it should not be thought that the psalmist had no higher purpose in his choice of words than maintaining an art form. He consecrated an art form to the service of truth, and not the reverse. ‘Art For art’s sake’ was not his motto.” The word is used over a dozen times in Psalm 119, and in five just in this section.

In addition to its primary, literal meaning of a road or a trodden path, the word is used figuratively for a course of life or mode of action as in the habits of animals and the customs of humans on the one hand (as in Proverbs 30:19) and also for the demands of the Lord and his dealings with his people on the other (as in Psalm 119:27).

Proverbs 30:19

the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a serpent on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a virgin.

Psalm 119:27

27 Make me understand the way of your precepts,
and I will meditate on your wondrous works.

We’ve already encountered this image of a path in our study of Psalm 119. In the first section, Aleph (vv. 1-8), the psalmist used this word three times in verse 1, 3, and 5 to describe the way, or the course of life of one who is truly blessed. In the second section, Beth (vv. 9-16), a section that is often associated with Bible memorization, the psalmist uses the word again in verse 14 to describe the blessings that come from habitually delighting in the word of God regardless of circumstances. In our last study, when we looked at the section of Gimel (vv. 17-24), the psalmist again alludes to this image of a path, while not using the word directly, but describing how God rebukes those who wander from his word; they are “the insolent, accursed ones” (v. 21).

It is in this metaphorical sense that it's used here because the psalmist is relating his ways to the Lord's, recording how these ways can diverge and what results when this occurs, as well as what results when they come together again. A central theme of this section of Psalm 119 has to do with choosing to walk down one of two paths—a way of falsehood (v.29) or a way of faithfulness (v. 30). The psalmist continues to write in the second person, using imperative verbs, meaning that this section is largely a prayer that cries out for revival (v. 25), understanding (vv. 26-27), strength (v. 28), direction (vv. 29-30), and confidence (vv. 31-32), all result of returning to the preferred way of faithfulness.

Language

During our study of this Psalm, you'll notice that we will frequently refer to the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) as the Greek words often add significant insights to the meaning of the verse. In a sense, the Septuagint functions somewhat like a “commentary” on the Hebrew text. In fact, many (if not most) of the Old Testament quotations made by the writers of the New Testament are taken not from the Hebrew text but from the Greek text, the Septuagint.

Most word studies and definitions will be taken from PreceptAustin.org, and BlueLetterBible.com which includes Strong's Concordance, as well as Hywel R. Jones's 2009 book *Psalm 119 for Life: Living Today in the Light of God's Word*, referenced above.

A Cry for Revival (v. 25)

25 My soul clings to the dust;
give me life according to your word!

Unpacking this opening image will set the stage for the contrast of two paths that the psalmist will be describing. He begins this section complaining that his soul, his entire being, his very life “clings to the dust.” This picture connotes an image of death or humiliation, which means that this is no surface trouble he's experiencing; he is in a very low, dark place. Notice that his soul “clings” or “cleaves” to that dust. It is the Hebrew verb *dabaq* (or translated as the Greek word *kollao* in the Septuagint) which literally means to stick or adhere to. The first use of this word in Genesis describes the supernatural union of a man and a woman in marriage (2:24).

Genesis 2:24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Psalm 22:15

my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.

Psalm 44:25

For our soul is bowed down to the dust;
our belly clings to the ground.



Romans 7:22-24 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

This cry for life, “give me life,” implies that the writer has spiritual need, lowliness, and a shamed awareness of sin with an urgency to make things right. As we shall see, confession will come later in the passage. The psalmist knew what he needed, and asked for new spiritual life, according to God’s word. God uses his word to bring life. In doing that, the writer asks for a revival of life and vitality to be restored according to the word of God.



What does this teach us about God’s word? That it has and gives life, and therefore should be our life. Quoting Deuteronomy, Jesus taught that “it is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4). Bread, in a physical sense, is like the scriptures in a spiritual sense: a life-sustaining form of nourishment. Similarly, in his parting words to Israel, Moses declared the following:

Deuteronomy 32:46-47 46 he said to them, “Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. 47 For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.”

To better understand the statement in verse 25, I believe it can be instructive to unpack this quotation from Moses’s farewell sermon in Deuteronomy 32:46-47. He commands the people to “take to heart” the commands found in the scriptures because these are “your very life.” The Septuagint uses the word prosecho here, which means to hold to, toward or before. It’s a word used to describe a moored or tied up ship. What a great picture of what a Christian’s life should look like: we are like ships set adrift on the wild waters of this world, and we need to be safely moored in the harbor of God’s word. That Greek word was also used to mean “to remain on course,” which is another familiar picture of our lives staying “on course” as we are guided by the “true GPS” of God’s word. Further, “take” in the Greek is in the present imperative (ie keep on taking) which is a command to make this one’s habitual practice, to daily take God’s word to heart.

How do we do that? How do we continually keep taking God’s word to heart in reliance on the Holy Spirit so that the result is revival, or “life according to your word”? Here are three suggestions:

1. Daily Reading- The heart is the control center, and we must read the Bible so consistently so that it becomes part of our very being, a part of everyday life like eating (see Matther 4:4 again).

Matthew 4:4

But he answered, “It is written,
“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

We don't treat eating like a chore. It is a necessary act to survive, and we feel it when it's been a while since we've done it. Even if we are dieting, we don't treat eating like a box-checking action that we do once a day, but rather we seek to have at least one (but often three) meals a day for nourishment, and we even add snacks because we feel it when we haven't eaten. It is necessary for reviving us.

2. Memorization- Taking the word of God to heart involves memorizing it diligently, like a treasure hidden to keep safe because when we have the word of God stored or hidden in our hearts, and treasure it like gold and silver, that word will function to keep us from sin (Psalm 119:11), and revive us.

Psalm 119:11

I have stored up your word in my heart,
that I might not sin against you.

3. Meditation- As it is so consistent in our lives like eating, and so treasured in our heart that we seek to remember it, we will also be meditating on it all the time.

Joshua 1:8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

Psalm 1:2-3

2 but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
3 He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers

To wrap up this thought, when the psalmist felt like his soul “clings to the dust,” or near death, he responded by praying that God would give him life, revive him, according to his word. This meant looking to God's word for life. And to do that, it involves reading it, memorizing it, and meditating on it. What do you turn to during moments of crisis? Do you turn to yourself? Do you turn to the arts? Do you turn to vices? May we seek to imitate the psalmist during moments of

crisis and turn to prayer and seek revival through the word of God which will direct us to how to give God the glory that is due to him.

Hebrews 6:12 So that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Job 23:12 I have not departed from the commandment of his lips;
I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.

A Cry for Understanding (vv. 26-27)

26 When I told of my ways, you answered me;
teach me your statutes!

27 Make me understand the way of your precepts,
and I will meditate on your wondrous works.

In verse 26, the psalmist is confessing fully and freely to God. He has nothing to hide (as if he could hide anything from God anyway); he is holding nothing back, an instrumental aspect of a request for life. The verb “told” means to number, to recount, to relate and then to declare. The first Old Testament use refers to the (impossible) mathematical activity of numbering the stars when God makes his covenant with Abram. As such, this word is used to enumerate or list.

Genesis 15:5 And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

Following up his telling of his ways to God, he asks God to teach him his statutes. He’s not telling God what to do, he’s coming to God with an open heart wanting to hear from him. He is saying, “Here it is, God. Now teach me according to your ways.” Once again, the comfort that we find from God’s word especially during moments of crisis is found when we find out how we can be obedient to God, or in other words, how we can glorify God amid crisis.

The psalmist is confessing and owning his sin, and he’s coming clean to God. Sin is ever ready to pounce on us and sometimes it is successful! That is precisely when we need to tell our ways to the Lord even though he already knows. Any attempt to conceal sin is an exercise in futility anyway.

Hebrews 4:13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Proverbs 15:3

The eyes of the Lord are in every place,
keeping watch on the evil and the good.

The psalmist’s plea is for help to understand. He needs more than just knowledge, but understanding too. While there is nothing wrong with just praying for knowledge, asking for knowledge and understanding is so much better. In verse 27, we see that with greater

understanding comes meditation on God's "wondrous works." In the previous lesson we spent some time exploring the descriptive word "wondrous," a word derived from the verb "pala" which means "to be difficult, to be hard, to be extraordinary or amazing, be surpassing or to cause a wonderful thing to happen." In most of its Old Testament occurrences, "pala" refers to acts that are performed by the Lord expressing actions that are beyond the bounds of human powers or expectations, particularly his deliverances of Israel.

Exodus 3:20 So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.

Psalm 106:22

wondrous works in the land of Ham,
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

The psalmist wants God to reveal to him true biblical understanding, not just a matter of academics. But he's looking for knowledge of the great works of God, especially of his delivering of his people, and the understanding of how to apply those truths. God delivered his people, so God can deliver him. But he needs to ask God to teach him (v. 26) and to help him understand (v. 27) these truths to him. Even with degrees and deep knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, one still needs supernatural understanding from God.

Psalmist comes to the Lord in a humble place, having confessed and told him everything, he asks God to teach him his statutes, a synonym for the scriptures that means "to engrave" or "to inscribe," and carries the idea of the authority of God's written word that declares the authority and power of giving us laws. This is an acknowledgement of weakness and dependence on God, a two-way relationship that involves open confession, and in return, true understanding of him. May we seek a true understanding of God's authority and find comfort in that!

A Cry for Strength (v. 28)

28 My soul melts away for sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word!

The crisis that has made him "cling to the dust" made him feel such sorrow that he describes it like his soul is melting. I believe the New American Standard Bible translation captures the feeling well: "My soul weeps because of grief." When we feel weak and in grief like this, we need to look to God to strengthen us. How? Prayer for revival, understanding and strength, all "according to your word."

"Strengthen me" is of course figurative, referring to making the heart and mind and soul and spirit firm and sure. The Septuagint renders it with the Greek word "bebaioo" which means to establish, make sure, to strengthen inwardly, make unwavering. Like verse 25 this word is in the aorist imperative tense in Greek, meaning that it is not as if the psalmist is commanding God, but more of crying out in desperate, urgent need for his intervention. Note God's part is to strengthen internally, but our part is not passive but is to be an active intake of the pure milk of the word that by it we might grow up into salvation (including being spiritually strengthened).

Ephesians 3:16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,

1 Peter 2:2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—

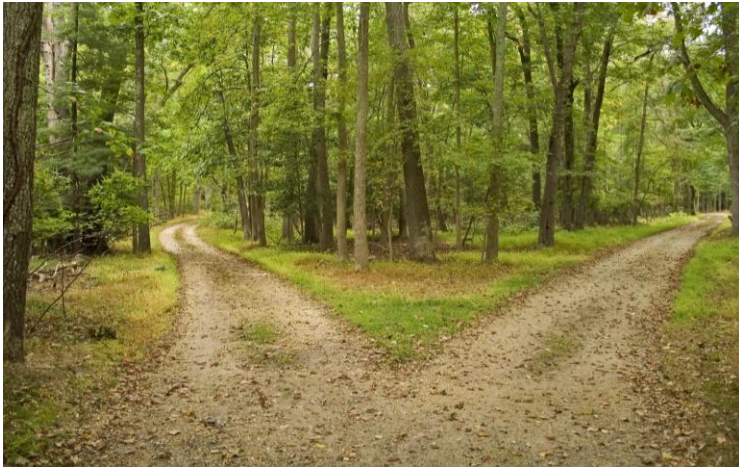
This is reminiscent of the old adage that a Bible that's falling apart rarely belongs to a believer that is falling apart.

The psalmist is feeling a heavy burden. If we want a Biblical example of a person bearing a heavy burden, we need look no further than Christ himself as the greatest example. Christ prayed and quoted scripture. Jesus, the living word, received strength from the word. So when you and I need strength to bear our burdens, you and I have a sympathetic savior who knows what we are going through. He knows first hand how this strength needs to be brought to us, and how we need to receive it: through prayer and the scriptures. May we seek to imitate the psalmist and Christ and ask that the Lord may strengthen us according to his word.

A Cry for Direction (vv. 29-30)

29 Put false ways far from me
and graciously teach me your law!

30 I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
I set your rules before me.



In verses 29-30, we encounter a contrast between the way of falsehood and the way of faithfulness, and the psalmist is determined to choose the latter way. The world promotes “false ways,” lies. We must choose the way of truth. But how? Pray for God to remove the false ways from you and to graciously teach you his law. It is impossible to truly receive and assimilate God’s truth (or his law) when we are encumbered by the false way. “False” is the Hebrew word “sheqer” which refers to a way of life

walking completely contrary to God’s law. The Septuagint uses the word “adikia,” which conveys wrongdoing, unrighteousness, wickedness. Back in verse 26, the psalmist confessed his ways, and now he pleads for the way which is false to be removed, to be withdrawn. Again looking at the Greek translation in the Septuagint, the verb that the ESV translates “put... far from me,” (or “remove” in the NASB), is the verb “aphistemi” conveying the cry to God to keep it away. As the psalmist depends on God to remove the false way, he also depends on God to “graciously teach” him the law. To be kept from sin, it has to be done by the grace God exercised through the teaching of his word.

The “way of faithfulness” is the way of God’s word, the path lit by the truth of God’s word. The psalmist will later write that the word of God “is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (119:105). Notice the action of the psalmist in the latter half of verse 30: “I have set your rules before me.” This is how he was able to choose the way of truth. He was in close fellowship, intentionally. It was a part of his practice. I have often noticed that if I don’t prepare my lunch for work the night before, I am far more likely to neglect making it in the morning. In fact, if I need to take a package or box of supplies with me to work the next day, I place it someplace where I will literally trip over it (or set it before me) on my way out, so I won’t forget about it. Similarly, we must be determined to take action when it come to choosing the way of faithfulness. May we pray for the false way of the world be removed from us, and may we intentionally set the Lord’s rules before us.

A Cry for Confidence (vv. 30-32)

31 I cling to your testimonies, O Lord;
let me not be put to shame!
32 I will run in the way of your commandments
when you enlarge my heart!

The psalmist wraps up this section of Psalm 119 with a similar image as in the opening. Whereas in verse 25, he clung to the dust sorrowfully, he now clings to the Lord’s testimonies joyfully. This means he is “stuck like glue” to God’s truth. He follows close and hard after God’s testimonies which speaks of close contact with God’s word. This too is our daily need. To cling means to give himself fully, to attach. I picture a person shipwrecked at sea clinging to a life preserver. That is how desperately we need to embrace and hold on to the word of God. Not doing so, in fact, is cause for shame (v. 31b). Sin brings shame, so this is another prayer out of a desperate, broken heart. The psalmist senses his deep need for forgiveness because of his sins.

The root meaning of shame (bosh) is “to become pale” or “to blush.” When sin occurs, there should be a disconcerting feeling, or a flushing of the face. If this is not the case, then raise the red flags! Someone may become so numb that their conscience doesn't even know how to blush anymore!

Jeremiah 6:15

Were they ashamed when they committed abomination?

No, they were not at all ashamed;
they did not know how to blush.

Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;

at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,”
says the Lord.

The word for shame used in verse 31 often occurs in contexts of humiliation and shattered human emotions. It is the feeling of public disgrace. It can refer to confusion, embarrassment, or dismay when things don’t turn out as expected. Clinging to God’s word, leads to obedience, and avoids this type of shame.

The synonym for God's word used in verse 31 is "testimonies," a term which is related to the word for witness, and signifies loyalty to a covenant. It speaks of the trustworthiness and faithfulness of what God says, the way that the psalmist chose in verse 30. To stick to the way of truth and rely on it is well placed confidence.

Notice the progression that the psalmist has taken since verse 25 where he was near death clinging to dust. Then he's confessing, then he's choosing, and now in verse 32 he is running in the way of the Lord's commandments: from dust to dashing! Notice also the synonym for God's word that is used here: "commandments." The Hebrew word emphasizes the straight (divine) authority of what is said. Rather than walking in the commandments, the psalmist is running the course of the commandments. What is the course? Genesis to Revelation. How do we run this course? We run by fixing our eyes on the only one who ever ran the race perfectly, our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

The psalmist ends by saying that God will enlarge his heart. From this, we can glean that God makes our heart better, bigger, more steadfast in order to pursue God how he deserves to be pursued. If we choose to read the Bible regularly, but do so in our own strength, you might end up in a worse spiritual condition than at the beginning, especially if it works because it leads to pride. May we run the course, but not rely on our own self will and strength. May we pray for the Lord to enlarge our hearts so we can do this.

