

## How to Make the Word of God Your Guide (Psalm 119:33-40)

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### 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, and today we will examine the fifth section which begins with the Hebrew letter *He*. In ancient Hebrew, this letter is used at the beginning of verbs to make them causative. Therefore, the prayers which begin the lines in this section can be literally read, “cause me to learn” (v. 33), “cause me to understand” (v. 34), “cause me to be lead” (v. 35), and so on.



One of the psalmist’s favorite images is that of a path or a way. Each section we have studied so far in Psalm 119 prominently features such imagery to make his point. This section with a request for God to teach the speaker “the way of your statutes,” is no exception. I’ve titled this study “How to Make the Word of God Your Guide” because this section provides us with a model of how to do just that—how to keep the way and word of God. Spoiler alert: it’s prayer. Thematically, this section is a series of prayers, as is the majority of this 176-verse psalm, about the effect God’s word can have on the lives of his children. I pray that as we look at the psalmist’s prayers in today’s passage, we would be encouraged and motivated to pray similarly as God impacts our life through his word.

#### Language

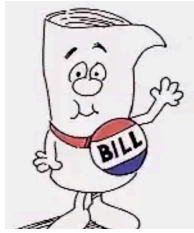
During our study of this Psalm, you’ll notice that we will frequently refer to the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) as the Greek words often add significant insights to the meaning of the verse. In a sense, the Septuagint functions somewhat like a “commentary” on the Hebrew text. 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](http://PreceptAustin.org), and [BlueLetterBible.com](http://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.

#### The psalmist prays for his mind (vv. 33-34).

33 Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes;  
and I will keep it to the end.

34 Give me understanding, that I may keep your law  
and observe it with my whole heart.



*Cause me to be taught... (v. 33)*

The writer begins with a simple request to be taught, a prayer that stresses a desire to keep the way and word of God. To paraphrase, the prayer, “If only you will teach me, I will persevere,” something only a God-changed heart can sincerely pray. The Septuagint translates the word “teach” in verse 33 using a word that literally means “to put a law” and means to enact, make, give, or establish as law.

Left to ourselves, we are unable to put our learning into practice, to keep the law or keep the way, much less keep it “to the end.” Left to ourselves, we will never stay faithful to God’s way, we will never stay faithful to God’s word, and we will certainly won’t make it until the end. This psalmist who is so passionate about God’s word felt he needed to pray this, how much more do you and I need to pray this. The New Testament supports this idea.

**Philippians 2:12-13** 12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.



In verse 33, as in Philippians 2:12-13, we see a balance that permeates Scripture—man’s human responsibility blended with God’s divine resources. Paul was talking about keeping this balance in Christian witness. But how important it is to keep these two dimensions in balance no matter what our responsibilities, circumstances, and goals? Our responsibility is our response to God’s ability. Toaster can’t toast without being plugged in (cf John 15:4).

**John 15:4** Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

We need God to put the desire for his word in us, but also we need God to work in us so we will actually do what our godly desires lead us to do. We should have the expectation that we can follow him and his word to the end, without excuses.

***May God fill us with a desire for his word, and fill us with a desire to keep and obey his word, and do so to the end.***

*Cause me to understand... (v. 34)*

He doesn’t just pray for knowledge, nor does he just pray for knowledge without a changed life. To paraphrase his promise, “I will live it if you teach it to me.” Without understanding, the psalmist can’t follow the desires of his transformed heart. The word translated “understanding” here means “insight, discernment, the ability to distinguish between good and evil.” We need understanding to persevere in the faith. We need not only biblical knowledge, but understanding. It’s very important to know WHAT to believe, but we must also know WHY we should believe it, and WHY it is good, right, honorable, and profitable.

## **2 Timothy 3:10-17**

10 You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, 11 my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. 12 Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 13 while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it 15 and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

“Equipped” in verse 17 means “to finish, accomplish” and as it were, to render the days complete.

That God had given his word to mankind, and to the psalmist specifically was not even in question to him. The knowledge is before him. His concern was that he might not understand it or that he might be distracted from it. Confident that God had spoken, and that it could be understood rightly, he simply prays for understanding. What he does doubt is his own ability to understand. This should be our prayerful determination: that we want to know, we want to understand God’s word.

***May we commit ourselves to live what we will be taught by the word of God by daily praying this consistently. These are prayers about long term commitment.***

## **Ecclesiastes 5:1-2**

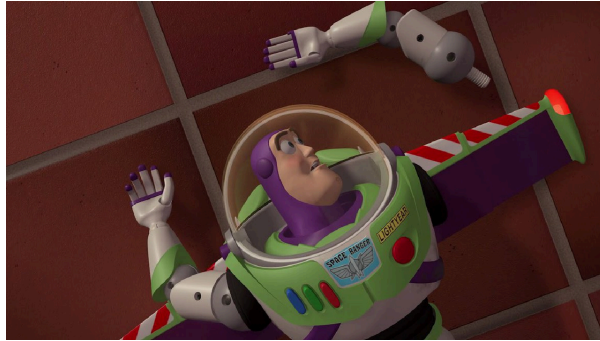
1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. 2 Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

### **The psalmist prays for his feet (v. 35).**

35 Lead me in the path of your commandments,  
for I delight in it.

So far we’ve seen that the psalmist realizes that he must depend on the Lord to receive God’s word. He also realizes that he must depend on the Lord to give him understanding of the word. He realizes that he needs the Lord to teach him his word. And now we learn that despite his delight and desire for God’s word, he can only stay walking in the path of the Lord’s commandments by relying on God, and so he prays that the Lord would cause him to walk in the path of his commandments. This is true of us as well. We need God’s strength, empowering, and wisdom to be able to do what verse 35 says, “lead me [or cause me to walk] in the path of your commandments.”

We again come across two favorite ideas of the psalmist, that of a path (road, or way) and delight. The prayer for guidance here could be restated something like this: “Lord, cause me to walk, make my feet stay in the well trodden path of your authoritative commands, because this is where I find delight, or true pleasure.” Our true purpose is to find pleasure in what we were meant to do, and I don’t mean this as merely finding a career path. As God’s people, we were chosen, not out of any merit on our part, by God’s grace to be holy and blameless.



**Ephesians 2:8-10** 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

**Ephesians 1:3-4** 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In him

### **The psalmist prays for his heart (v. 36).**

36 Incline my heart to your testimonies,  
and not to selfish gain!

The psalmist recognizes that the pursuit of selfish gain, or what the NASB translates as “covetousness” is a threat to walking in God’s way. Therefore, he prays for his heart to be inclined to God’s word, which will help him be satisfied in what God provides. He’s asking God to give him a greater heart for God’s testimonies, than for coveting material things.

The Bible tells us how covetousness has ruined many people.

- Balaam sold out God’s people and his own soul because he coveted (Numbers 22, 2 Peter 2:14-16).
- Ahab murdered because he coveted (1 Kings 21:1-13).
- David committed adultery and murder because he coveted (2 Samuel 11:2-17).
- Achan stole and brought Israel to defeat because he coveted (Joshua 7:21).
- Judas stole from his fellow disciples and betrayed Jesus because he coveted (John 12:6 and Matthew 26:14-16).
- Gehazi lied because he coveted (2 Kings 5:20-27).

· Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit because he coveted (Acts 5:1-6).

“Selfish gain” or “covetousness” is one of those quicksand types of sins that one easily falls into and is difficult to get out of, especially because we live in an age and a culture which values the pursuit of self-gratification. “You don’t have enough. Your next door neighbor has more than you have; you should have what they have! No, you should have more than they do!” Messages like these permeate our culture, and it’s so easy to believe it. This is a real danger for us.



Charles Spurgeon once observed that “the leaning of the heart is the way in which the life will lean... The only way to cure a wrong leaning is to have the soul bent in the opposite direction.” What a blessing that we can pray for God to incline our hearts to his word. We would do well to frequently pray verse 36 since our human hearts are inclined one of two ways, either toward God or away from God. Jesus alludes to this in the sermon on the mount, as does Paul when warning Timothy about false teachers.

**Matthew 6:24** “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

**1 Timothy 6:8-10** 8 But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

Paul calls the love of money “the root of all kinds of evils” because no sin that a covetousness person will not do for the sake of getting what they want. Just look at the biblical examples listed above. What an important thing to pray for as we go about our day.

Notice the imagery in the prayer to “incline my heart” in Psalm 119:36. The verb translated “incline” is used in a literal sense all over the Old Testament. According to *Strong’s*, the word was used to mean “to stretch or spread out; by implication, to bend away (including moral deflection); used in a great variety of application (as follows):— afternoon, apply, bow (down, -ing), carry aside, decline, deliver, extend, go down, be gone, incline, intend, lay, let down, offer, outstretched, overthrown, pervert, pitch, prolong, put away, shew, spread (out), stretch (forth, out), take (aside), turn (aside, away), wrest, cause to yield.” In each of these cases, the action involves some sort of pointing, adjusting, bending, or manipulation. The psalmist knows that his heart is naturally inclined to selfish gain, literally “unjust gain, [or or profit] acquired by violence” (*Stong’s*) so he needs the Lord to move or bend his heart, to put his desires in his heart.



### Psalm 37:4

Delight yourself in the Lord,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

***May we recognize our hearts' natural inclination to selfish gain, and combat with prayerful dependence on God to incline our hearts to his testimony.***

**The psalmist prays for his eyes (v. 37).**

37 Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things;  
and give me life in your ways.

Reading this verse, let's first consider what we do with material things that we deem worthless. We avoid and even get rid of them, right? The psalmist literally says, "Make [or cause] my eyes pass by from looking at what is worthless." What a wise and humble prayer; he realizes he is always one step away from falling into sin. Paul warns the church in Corinth about how easy it is to fall into sin by using Israel's failures in the wilderness as an example of what not to do, and he also tells them that God provides a way of escape from all temptations.



Worthless  
things

Life in  
your ways

**1 Corinthians 10:12-13** 12 Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. 13 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Constant prayer, particularly like the psalmist prays here, to have his eyes turned is an invaluable asset to avoid sin. The word translated "turn" is used to describe movement, as a rule it is the movement of one thing in relation to some other object which is stationary, moving, or motivating. In other words, the psalmist's prayer is for his eyes to move away from worthless things. The Septuagint translates the verb in the aorist imperative tense, meaning that it is a command to do this now, implying a sense of urgency.

I hope we can appreciate the urgency of praying that our eyes be turned from what is worthless, especially when we examine the meaning of "worthless things," or "vanity" as the NASB puts it. The Hebrew word for worthless here can be used as "deceitful, empty, or false," all words that can be used to describe idols. The same word is used in Jeremiah 18:15 to describe idols that caused God's people to forget him.

### Jeremiah 18:15

But my people have forgotten me;  
they make offerings to false [worthless, empty, deceitful] gods;  
they made them stumble in their ways,  
in the ancient roads,

and to walk into side roads,  
not the highway,

Many things we tend to choose to spend time looking at can be in effect idols when we prioritize them more than God. The psalmist rightly understood that some things are, comparatively speaking, are worthless things. While not necessarily bad in and of themselves, some things are of no value for eternity and have little value for the present life. He prayed that God would empower and enable him to turn away his eyes and attention from such things. He understands that he has a natural tendency toward worthless things, so he prays that that tendency would be counteracted.

Warren Wiserbe once wrote that “Outlook determines outcome. What you are seeing helps to determine what you are becoming. So you’d better be careful what you look at.” The moment in human history in which we live offers a constant stream of entertainment and amusements, literally at our fingertips, and most of it can fall into the category of “worthless things.” These are things that occupy our minds, and hearts, but they get there by way of our eyes. Many things are clearly worthless, but some things seem worthy, but they are actually worthless:

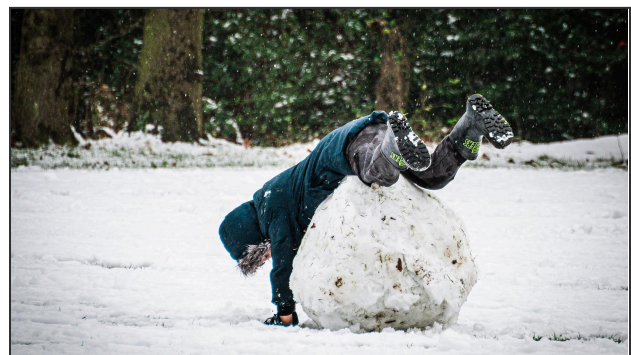
- worthless because they do no good.
- worthless because they do not last.
- worthless because they do not help anyone.
- worthless because they do not build up.
- worthless because they distract from things that are actually worthy.
- worthless because they have nothing to do with Jesus.

A verse that nicely parallels this passage is Psalm 101:3, in which David determines not to set worthless things before his eyes.

**Psalm 101:3**

I will not set before my eyes  
anything that is worthless.  
I hate the work of those who fall away;  
it shall not cling to me.

Despite the personal pronouns David uses (I, my, I, me), he is not saying that he can do this in his own strength. He knew (or would soon learn—depending on when this Psalm was written) about the destructive, snowballing effects of setting worthless things before his eyes. Note the use of the word “cling,” which we encountered a few lessons ago in verses 25 and 31. The word could mean “stick like glue,” and was used in



Genesis 2:24 to describe a one-flesh nature of marriage. That is what happens with what you look at; beware what you watch or it will stick like glue. While each of us is personally responsible for what we allow before our eyes, thankfully, it's God's Spirit that is in us to give us the desire and power to please him today.

**Philippians 2:13** for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure

As we discussed earlier, the Psalm 119 writer was so aware of his natural tendency towards worthless things (a sadly universal human tendency that we all share), that he asked for a power outside himself to turn his eyes. Does he not have eyelids? Are his neck muscles stiff? Can't he turn his head? He doesn't pray for his eyes to be removed, but for them to be turned to another direction, to look at a better way. The eyes lead the heart and mind.

In the second half of verse 37, the psalmist asks for life "give me life in your ways." This is something he has done already in verses 17 and 25, but this time, he is indicating that he senses a need for revival in the way or path of God. In essence, he prayed for deadness in one direction – toward worthless things – and for life in another direction – toward God's way. The Septuagint continues this sentence in the aorist imperative, which makes this an urgent and desperate cry for God's Spirit to breathe new life into his heart.

***May we look to look at the word of God, which is true and useful, as a treasure that endures forever.***

#### **Psalm 119:89**

"Forever, O Lord, your word  
is firmly fixed in the heavens.

#### **The Psalmist prays for confirmation (v. 38).**

38 Confirm to your servant your promise,  
that you may be feared.

Think of situations in life when confirmation of something is necessary. Often it means that there is a lack of trust. I believe the psalmist lacks confidence here and needs reassurance, but his lack of confidence is not in God or his word, but in himself. This is not a prayer for God to change his word in some way, or for God to prove that his word is true. In fact the synonym for God's word here, "imrâ" which the ESV translates "promises," is a word that may denote anything that God has spoken, commanded or promised, intended to encourage and be the basis for expectation. The lack of expectation, the lack of confidence comes from within—so he prays for God to confirm those promises—the guarantees he reads about in the scriptures inside of the psalmist himself. This is a prayer for a change in the heart and mind of the servant of God, so that the word of the Lord would be "established" in him, as the NASB translates.

He describes himself as a servant, acknowledging his submission to God and to his will. Notice the effect that God's word should cause. God's word, and the promises found in it, should



produce a holy, reverential fear of God. Commenting on this passage, Charles Spurgeon wrote the following:

“Make thy word to me real and true. Put away my natural skepticism, my proneness to question, my tendency to doubt... Make me to know how firm, how true, how real it is, for I would love it more and more. I do believe it, for I am devoted to thy fear, but I long to be still further established in the faith.”

Plainly, if there is a contradiction between one’s heart and God’s word, it’s the individual’s heart that needs to change. There is a great danger when people try to bend God’s word to fit into something rather than bending one’s heart to God’s will.

***May we have an attitude like Mary when Gabriel brought God’s word to her in Luke 1:38.***

**Luke 1:38** And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

**The psalmist prays for what comes next (vv. 39-40).**

39 Turn away the reproach that I dread,  
for your rules are good.

40 Behold, I long for your precepts;  
in your righteousness give me life!

If verses 33-38 are your prayer, you’ll stick out, and may face some reproach, meaning taunts or disgrace. In fact, as faithful followers of Christ, we can expect it. Here, the psalmist asks for the reproach to be turned away from him, because he dreads it, but acknowledges that God’s rules (mišpāt), or his or judgements, verdicts (whether favorable or not) are good, a word that could be used to describe what is best. The psalmist will have more to say on suffering reproach soon, and the New Testament certainly had a few things to say on the topic as well.

**Psalm 119:42**

then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me,  
for I trust in your word.

**Psalm 119:51**

The insolent utterly deride me,  
but I do not turn away from your law.

Paul and Peter expected to suffer reproach, experience it, and even saw benefit in it.

**1 Corinthians 12:10** For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

**1 Peter 4:14** If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

Suffering reproach should not only be expected as a follower of Christ, but it is “granted” to believers just like belief.

**Philippians 1:29** For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,

Again, in verse 40, the psalmist prays for life to close this section of Psalm 119. The prayer comes from a heart that longs for God’s precepts. This synonym for God’s word, *piqqûdîm*, is drawn from a root that means “to attend to, visit, or frequent often as in the sphere of one who is responsible to look closely into the situation and to take action,” like a manager or overseer. By implication the word points to the particular instructions of the Lord as one who cares about detail. With that vocabulary lesson in mind, look again at his declaration: “I long for your precepts.” The juxtaposition of God’s precepts and being made alive is notable. He longs for the detailed instructions in God’s word, and asks to be made alive in the righteousness of God. We’ve encountered the idea of being made alive, or revival, in this Psalm three times already (verses 25, 37, and 40), and we will encounter it several more time as we continue this study (eight more times to be precise in verses 50, 88, 93, 107, 149, 154, 156, 159). Given the concentration of the idea of being made alive or revived in Psalm 119, and our dire need for daily spiritual revival because of the many distractions inherent in this godless world in which we live, it benefits us as God’s children to frequently immerse ourselves in God’s word.

***May we each be like a ShamWow that constantly soaks up the waters of God’s word.***

