

Psalm 119

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[0 : 00] One of the privileges that we have as being part of this particular congregation of Bonacord is that we have a good number of young people who make up the congregation, be that from the very young, primary age, preschool children, teenagers and young people.

Even tonight, it's good to see a great deal of young people amongst us. Now, I say that not because we idolize youth or imagine that the young are more voluble than those of us of more mature years, but rather because it bucks a trend.

It's the reality, certainly within our own country, that in many churches up and down the land, the demographics of the congregations would be very different. And that gives a lie to maybe a myth that is often peddled that young folk aren't interested in church, and it's good to see that that is not the case.

God, as He reveals Himself in the Bible, places a particular emphasis on the importance of the young and on the need for young men and women to be instructed in the faith.

We could give so many examples. One that comes to mind is in the first few chapters of the book of Proverbs. We find repeated references to my son, and then instruction is given.

[1 : 31] And the picture is of a father or certainly an older believer giving instruction to a young man, a young person in the ways of God.

And it seems clear that that instruction, though not exclusively directed or applicable to the young, is intentionally intended particularly for those who are young.

And a similar emphasis is found in the passage that we've read this evening, and that we want to spend some time considering. In Psalm 119, and from verse 9 through to the end of that section, it begins with this question, How can a young man keep his way pure?

How can a young man keep his way pure? And then the question is immediately answered by living according to your word, and then that whole theme is developed in a number of ways.

This question is the one that we want to focus on, and our thoughts will revolve around, how can a young man keep his way pure?

[2 : 40] We'll make reference to the whole portion of the Psalm, verses from 9 through to verse 16. But as I say, our focus will be very much on this question and the immediate answer that follows there in verse 9.

And to give some order to what we want to say, I think we can identify a number of realities or implications in the very question that is posed and the immediate answer provided there in verse 9.

How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. And I would suggest that these are a number of realities or implications that we can draw, even from the question and immediate answer.

First of all, a reality is identified. An implicit reality is identified in the question that is posed. Also, an audience is highlighted in the question posed.

A goal is held in view. For those who would listen and pay attention to the question posed and the answer given, a goal is held in view. A desire is presumed or certainly required.

[3 : 54] And that is also something we'll notice in the question and answer. And then where the Psalm dwells for a great amount of time and more information is given, a way is set out.

A way is set out whereby that goal that is held in view can be secured. So, we want to think about these different aspects that we draw from the question and the immediate answer.

First of all, then, a reality is identified. We might call it a twofold reality, though the two aspects of it are so intertwined that it's really one reality.

It's a reality concerning our condition, our fallen nature as sinners. And this comes to light. It's implicit in the very question that is posed.

How can a young man keep his way pure? But the implication of the question is enriched, we might say, when we consider two ways in which the question can actually be translated.

[4 : 58] There's the way that we have here in the version of the Bible we are employing. How can a young man keep his way pure? But then, for those of us who maybe have in our mind the manner in which this question is translated in the older versions of the Bible, it's something along the lines of, how can a young man cleanse his way?

So, you have this possibility of the question being, how can a young man cleanse his way? Or how can a young man keep his way clean or pure? Obviously, these are very similar questions, but I think both of them identify two very connected realities.

Both forms of the question identify the reality of our sinfulness as men and women, young or old. We need to be cleansed. And once cleansed, we need to keep our way pure.

I think it is the case that the psalmist's particular concern is with the second aspect of keeping our way pure. But, of course, the first is foundational and can also legitimately drawn from the question posed.

So, we need to be cleansed. But once cleansed, we need to keep our way clean or pure. Now, the heart cleansing, the fundamental cleansing that we all require, we know can be provided only by God.

[6 : 19] He is the one who cleanses us. This very language is used by the psalmist. This language of being cleansed is used by the psalmist in Psalm 51.

In verse 7, we're familiar with the psalm. Cleanse me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I will be whiter than snow. And the psalmist, of course, directs this petition, this request to God who is the one who is able to cleanse him, to wash him from his sin.

The means, the only means provided for us by God for such cleansing is the shed blood of Christ, his death in our place, and the forgiveness that his death has secured for all who put their trust in him.

And even at this point, it's necessary to stress that if you've not begun here, if in your own experience you're not able to testify that you have cried out to God that he might cleanse you, and you have experienced the cleansing, the forgiving work of God in your life, then this is where you must begin.

To try and proceed to consider how you can keep your life pure is an exercise in futility if you have not begun here, if you have not been cleansed by God, to begin this new life walking in his ways.

[7 : 46] But as the question perhaps more obviously implies, once cleansed, we are to keep our way pure.

How can a young man keep his way pure? These two aspects that go very much together, this two-fold cleansing, if that's the term we want to use, reminds us of the words of Jesus when he washed his disciples' feet, or in the context of washing his disciples' feet.

And we remember the debate there was, and the protests even of the disciples as Jesus was engaged in washing their feet. And remember the words that he addressed to them.

A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet. His whole body is clean, and you are clean. And I think there in these words of Jesus, you have this recognition of these two aspects of spiritual cleansing.

This once-for-all cleansing, as we deposit our trust in Jesus as our Savior, and we are cleansed by his shed blood.

[8 : 53] But then this need to continue being cleansed as we walk in his ways. So, in the question, implicit in the question, there is this reality identified.

We are sinners in need of cleansing. And even as cleansed sinners, we are called to keep our way pure, as our own tendency is rather to go in the other direction.

So, that's the first thing I think we can draw from the question that's posed. It identifies a reality, the reality of our fallen sinful condition. But the other thing that the question does is it identifies, or it rather highlights, a particular audience.

How can a young man keep his way pure? The focus in this question is on a young man very explicitly. Now, different ideas are proposed as to who this young man is.

Some suggest that the psalmist is speaking of himself. We don't know who the author of this psalm is. We're not given. It's not identified. And so, who's to say?

[10 : 05] It may be the case. The psalmist, as he pens these words, is thinking of himself. How can I keep my way pure? And poses the question in the manner that he does so.

So, it's of curious interest, going along the lines of that possibility, to notice what he also says in the same psalm.

In verses 99 and 100 of the psalms. So, the same author, we don't know who he is, but certainly he wrote the whole psalm. What is it that he says there in verses 99 and 100?

I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts. That would suggest that the one who has penned the psalm is a young man.

And so, he's able to express himself in this way, contrasting who he is vis-à-vis those who are his elders. Maybe it's possible that here the psalmist is speaking of himself.

[11 : 07] What it may be, and perhaps more likely, these are words of instruction, words of challenge. A more mature believer challenging those who are young. And challenging them to ponder on this great question before them.

How can a young man keep his way pure? Why would it be that the young are explicitly identified as those who need to keep their way pure?

I'm sure we'd all agree that we all need to keep our way pure. This isn't a challenge that only confronts the young. But nonetheless, it is the young who are explicitly identified here.

So, why might that be? Why might there be a particular concern or challenge toward the young to keep their way pure? The reformer, John Calvin, gives a couple of suggestions as to why the focus here is particularly towards the young.

And the young being particularly challenged to keep their way pure. And let me just quote what he says, or one of the things he says. Youth puts men where two ways meet.

[12 : 15] And renders it imperative for them to select the course of life which they mean to follow. And the language, to paraphrase it, basically is saying when you're young, you've got big choices to make.

It's when you're young where you really decide the course of your life. Decisions taken when you're young will mark not only your immediate future, but your distant future. And so he says, for the young it's so crucial, it's so critical to make those choices and to make right choices and to decide and to determine that this is the life that I'm going to live.

I'm going to live a life where I seek to keep my way pure. Or, Calvin also suggests, and I'm not sure if I'm altogether in agreement with him in this, that the young are more inclined to excess, more drawn to sin.

Well, I'm not sure if that's true or not, but I can see where he's coming from. And so he suggests that that's another reason why the young particularly are challenged. And the question is posed concerning them, how can a young man keep his way pure?

However, it is indeed the case that while you are still young, and here I can certainly say you and not we, but when you are still young, and if anybody here can take it, if they think it applies to you, then take it to yourself.

[13 : 38] While you are young, you do have this opportunity, this responsibility to take decisions that will set the direction of life. Something that is much more difficult to do as the years pass by.

That difficulty, really, of taking these life-changing decisions when the years pass by is, I think, recognized by the writer to Ecclesiastes. There in chapter 12, in verse 1, another verse very familiar in his reference to youth.

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth. That's a fine piece of advice, but notice what he goes on to say. Before the days of trouble come, and the years approach when you will say, I find no pleasure in them.

The implication seems to be that if you miss the boat, as it were, of taking these big decisions when you're young, well, the time will come, and you'll say, well, I've missed the chance. You know, I've lost so much time. I haven't got a life left to set the direction of.

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth. So, a particular audience is highlighted by the question, a young man. Now, I hope it's understood, though it's important to explicitly say that the reference to a young man is equally a call to young women.

[14 : 58] Young men, young women are equally challenged in this regard of keeping their lives pure. And though it's important to stress that all young are so challenged, I think it's also fair and legitimate to recognize how the church stands in urgent need.

Our congregation, our denomination, the church in Scotland stands in urgent need of godly young men. Young men who have determined with God's help to keep their way pure.

What great blessing there would be to us as a people of God as God raises up such young men who determine and with God's help, as I say, are able to keep their way pure.

So, an audience, a particular audience is highlighted in the question. But then, thirdly, the question identifies for us a goal. A goal is held in view, namely that of a life of purity.

How can a young man keep his way pure? This, what could we say, this goal is presented before young men and young women of a pure life, a godly life, a life marked by practical holiness, a life where our thoughts are pure, our conversation is pure, our banter is pure, our motivations are pure, our walk and our conduct is pure.

[16 : 35] This is the goal that is held out before us. In the last chapter of the book of Proverbs, the question is posed, a wife of noble character, who can find?

Might we add to that question, a young man of holy character, who can find? And what a great thing it is to find such a young man or woman.

This goal held in view might lack reality in the absence of a real life example. We might say, well, that all sounds very grand, but what does that look like? What does it look like to see a young man who is keeping his way pure?

Is there any hope of seeing such a model? Is there one who we could look to and say, well, there is the example of an unblemished life? How could we find such a man given that we are all, as we've already readily acknowledged, and indeed as the psalmist acknowledges, that we are all sinners?

Of course, in this matter, we stand at a distinct advantage to the psalmist, because we know that man of unblemished character, whose walk was ever pure, and his name is Jesus.

[17 : 51] And so when we turn to the Word of God, as we turn to the Gospels, and we meet face to face with him, we meet the one who is altogether unblemished, whose way was always pure.

And as we consider this challenge to effectively become like him, to become like Jesus, to walk in the way that he walked, and though it seems such a high calling, such an almost unrealistic one, yet we can take heart that the day is coming when we will be transformed into the likeness of God's Son.

Not that we should take this as an excuse for saying, well, I'll just wait for that day. No, we would hasten towards that reality in this life and in the opportunities God gives us now.

So a goal is held in view. But then we can say a further thing, and it is this, that a desire is presumed, or we might say required. If we understand the young man to be the psalmist himself, then we could say that a desire is presumed in the question that's posed.

If he's challenging young men, and certainly that's the way we're taking it now, that's the way we're employing the question, to challenge young men and women, then a desire is required.

[19 : 10] Third, if we are to meet this goal, if we are to even pursue this goal that is held in view, it's necessary for us to desire that.

And there's no doubt that the one who writes the psalm is one who knows this desire. How can a young man keep his way pure by living according to your word? And then what does he immediately go on to say?

I seek you with my whole heart. There very clearly, that is the evidence of his great desire to live this life that he is setting out before those who would read the psalm.

You need to want to keep your way pure. Young men, young women, you need to want to keep your way pure. It's not enough to recognize that keeping your way pure is a good thing.

Of course it's a good thing. Who would say that it's not a good thing? Who would say, well, that's not really very important, and well, I'm really not interested in that. If you're a Christian, you would surely recognize, yes, this is good.

[20 : 19] This is how it ought to be. But it's not enough just to recognize that it's a good thing, that that is what ought to be. It's necessary for this to be something that you desire.

You need to want it. If I can illustrate with very trivial examples, you know, when you see talent shows that are, you know, to a penny on weekend TV, and sometimes a young person, a young aspiring singer has sung their song, and the judges are asking them questions.

And sometimes the question they ask is, do you really want this? How much do you want this? And of course they respond with great enthusiasm. This is the most important thing in my life. This is what I most want more than anything else.

Or you can imagine maybe a coach of a young sportsman, and they need to train several times a week, and there's many sacrifices to be made. And the question we've posed, do you really want this?

Do you really want to make it? Because if you don't really want it, then you might as well just give up now. Because if you don't really want it, it's not going to happen. Well, I think in the matter of living a holy life, of keeping your way pure, this is a question, a very probing question.

[21 : 30] Is this something that I really want? Is this what I want more than anything else? To keep my way pure? Clearly the psalmist wanted this. He desired this.

And so because he desired it, so he made use of all the means that God provided to ensure that this goal that was set before him would be one that he could meet and achieve.

So I ask you the question this evening, keeping your way pure, how much do you want it? Well, listen to the psalmist and what he goes on to say in the immediately following verse, I seek you with all my heart.

But then finally, what we have here is a way that is set out. The question is posed, but then of course the question is answered. Really everything we've said thus far has simply been drawing aspects of the question, what's implicit in the question.

But of particular interest is, well, what answer is given? Well, the immediate answer is a very clear one. By living according to your word.

[22 : 38] This is the way that is set out whereby a young man, a young woman can keep his or her way pure by living according to your word. A holy life is secured only when we allow the word of God to command, to shape and direct our lives.

But what does that involve? What does that look like? Well, the psalm gives us answers to these questions. We need to know and we need to study God's word. If it is the word that will mold us and guide us and direct us, then it's self-evident that we need to know and we need to meditate on and study God's word.

That's what the psalmist declares that he is doing. I have hidden your word in my heart. I've hidden your word in my heart. It speaks of time and effort and discipline being employed in this endeavor.

Because if we don't know God's word, if we don't study God's word, how will it mold us and direct us in the manner that it is intended to do? It goes along with this, that we need to value God's word, to recognize its great worth.

Again, this is something that is true of the psalmist. In verse 14, he declares, We know how often the psalmist compares favorably God's word to gold and to sweet honey and to those things that are deemed to be of great value.

[24 : 07] And his conclusion is, your word is a far greater value. If God's word is to be that way whereby we are enabled to keep our life pure, then we need to know it and we need to value it.

And we also need to seek God's help to understand his word. You know, we may study God's word. We may hide it in our heart to use the language that the psalmist uses.

But then we need God to help us understand what it is that it means and what its implications are for us. And the psalmist is very careful to seek that help.

In verse 12, we read, Praise be to you, O Lord. Teach me your decrees. Teach me your decrees. I don't want to simply be able to memorize them and to recite them without understanding.

I need to understand what they mean and how they're going to direct my path. Indeed, we need to seek God himself, which in turn will give an ever greater appetite for his word.

[25 : 07] I seek you with all my heart, testifies the psalmist. And that testimony, the psalmist, is a very helpful one in the face of some who have suggested, very foolishly I might add, that the author of this psalm is guilty of Bible-olatory, of worshiping the book rather than the author.

Such an accusation is groundless because we recognize, even in this very section, how loving God's word is simply a reflection, an expression of one who loves the author of the word.

To delight in God's word is to delight in God. Again, in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the word of God, in the light of that great reality, we have grounds for even identifying God with the word of God.

The eternal Son, our Lord and Savior, is the word made of flesh. So the psalm provides for us, answers the question, how we can keep our way pure by living according to your word.

One final question that I want to pose and answer as we draw things to a close. And the question is this, what is the result of living according to your word?

[26 : 30] What's the result? That's the answer to the question that's posed. And what happens? What is the outcome of living according to God's word? Well, obviously, one outcome is a pure life.

That's a very obvious one. That's the question that's being posed. How can I live a pure life? Well, you can live a pure life in this way. So if we do live according to God's word, then we will also know what it is to live a pure life.

But we can say more. We can say that that pure life is also a blessed life. It's interesting to compare what is said there in verse 9, the answer to the question, by living according to your word, with what is said at the very beginning of the psalm in verse 1, blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord.

There, those who walk according to the law of the Lord are blessed. They are identified as those who live a blessed life. So a pure life, a blessed life.

And certainly a joyful life. Joy is something that is very prominent in these verses of Psalm 119. In verse 14, the psalmist exclaims, I rejoice in following your statutes, as one rejoices in great riches.

[27 : 48] In verse 16, I delight in your decrees. I will not neglect your word. And those who know more about the original language explained to us that that first use of the word rejoice is an exultant joy, a joy of celebration, one who celebrates discovering God's Word and following God's Word.

And then that word that is used in verse 16, I delight. What of a settled joy that can be experienced throughout life, that settled joy of knowing what it is, to know God and to follow Him according to His Word.

A pure life, a blessed life, a joyful life, and we might also say a missionary life. What does the psalmist say in verse 13? With my lips, I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.

Now, there may be a sense in which he recounts them to himself, to edify himself, but surely here there's also a sense in which he is announcing what he has discovered, what he has learned to others who would listen to him.

And so he shares what he's discovered with others. He shares his joy. He shares the outcome of this life lived according to God's Word with others.

[29 : 01] We can't keep God's Word to ourselves. But the result of a life living according to God's Word is also a life, and must be a life of praise.

At the very heart of this section, you have these words of praise directed to God. Praise be to you, O Lord. Praise be to you, O Lord. And these are the words of one who has discovered how he can keep his way pure, who has discovered the reality and the truth of the answer given by living according to your Word.

And as he discovers these things, as he discovers the riches of God's Word in his own experience, so he responds in praise to God for providing him with such riches.

Praise be to you, O Lord. May that be your experience. And I direct myself very particularly to the young, though, of course, the truths here apply to all of us, but very particularly to those who are young, that you would know what it is to praise the Lord as you discover the means that he has provided for you to be cleansed and to keep your life pure as you increasingly live according to his Word and discover the delights and joys that accompany such a life.

Well, let us pray. Heavenly Father,