

Psalm 119:9-16

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 August 2019

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Last week, we were thinking a little bit about the first section of Psalm 119, this remarkable acrostic poem, Hebrew poem that reflects on and celebrates the wonders of God's Word, and even more so, the wonder of the God whose Word it is.

This evening, we're going to move on to the next section, the second section of the Psalm of the poem. This is perhaps one of the more familiar sections, perhaps because of its stated target audience, young men and young women.

How can a young person stay on the path of purity? And so, if you're looking for a message for young people, well, look no further. Here you have one ready-made.

And so, perhaps for that reason, it's familiar and quite often sung, maybe more so than other sections of the Psalm. But of course, the advice that is directed to young men, to young people, to young men and women is, as we read the section, clearly advice that is suitable for all, regardless of age.

And while it is good, even this evening, to see a good number of young people in the service, the message of this section of the Psalm, though particularly appropriate for those who are young, is appropriate for all.

[1 : 35] And of course, how do you define young? The older I get, the broader the definition becomes. So, I would say at least half of the people here are young, or maybe more than half.

I don't know, I don't know what your definition of young is. But regardless of what your definition is, this section and the truth that it contains applies to all.

What we want to do is think a little bit about the question that is posed at the very beginning. How can a young person stay on the path of purity?

The question with which the section begins. And everything we will say will revolve around that question, but will involve making reference to much of what is said in the rest of this section of the Psalm.

I think we can identify a number of realities or implications that the very question and immediate answer there in verse 1 provide. So, the question, how can a young person stay on the path of purity?

[2 : 40] And then the immediate answer given by living according to your word. Even in that first verse, we can draw out a number of realities or implications that are implicit even in the question that is being posed.

So, let me just suggest what these are, and then we'll think about each of them in turn. First of all, I think that what the question does, among other things, is it identifies a reality.

It identifies a reality. Secondly, we've kind of touched on this and we won't dwell on this second aspect, but I'll mention it now. There is an audience that is highlighted.

In the very posing of the question, a particular audience is highlighted. So, a reality is identified, an audience is highlighted, but also a goal is held in view.

We'll think a little bit about, well, what is this goal that is held in view by the very posing of the question? I think there's another thing that's maybe not quite so explicit, but I think can be drawn from the question, and it is this, that the question presumes a desire.

[3 : 48] There's the presumption that there is a desire in the one who poses the question and who seeks an answer to the question, and we'll think a little bit about that as well.

And then finally, a way is set out in the section. So, I think hopefully as we go through them one by one, what I mean by these different implications will become clearer.

I certainly hope so. So, first of all, I suggested that one of the implications of the question is that a reality is identifying. In fact, I think, depending on how you translate the question, and we'll

comment on that in a moment, a two-fold reality concerning our fallen nature comes to light as we consider this question that is posed.

In the translation that we are employing in the church Bible, the question is posed in this way, or the manner in which the Hebrew is translated is, how can a young person stay on the path of purity? Other versions translate the question in this way, how can a young man cleanse his way? And so you have two alternatives, I think both can be argued for in terms of being defensible and good translations.

[5 : 15] How can a young man cleanse his way? Or how can a young man keep his way pure? Or a young person stay on the path of purity, which is the same idea. Now, these two alternative ways of translating together, I think, identify the reality of our sinfulness as men and women.

We need to be cleansed. How can a young man cleanse his way? We need to be cleansed. And once cleansed, we need to keep our way pure. How can a young man keep his way pure? So there's almost two moments there. There's this fundamental need that we all have as sinners to be cleansed. But even when we enjoy that, even when God in his grace comes and cleanses us and forgives our sins, as we continue living, there is a need to keep our way pure.

The heart cleansing that we all require can be provided only by God. We think of the words of the psalmist in Psalm 51, Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. And there's this recognition. There's no need to argue the case. It's simply evident that only God can cleanse sinners.

[6 : 39] And the means, the only means provided for us by God for such cleansing is the shed blood of Jesus.

His death in our place, and the forgiveness that his death has secured for all who trust in him. That is the only way in which we can be cleansed from our sins and the guilt of our sins.

If you've not begun here, then any other cleansing will fail to address the root problem. But once cleansed, we are to keep our way pure.

How can a young person stay on the path of purity is the way in which our version expresses it.

How can a young man keep his way pure is another way in which it is expressed.

Rest. This, let's call it, two-fold cleansing. It reminds us, perhaps a little, of the words of Jesus when he washed his disciples' feet, that he was explaining to them what it was he was doing.

[7 : 46] And as he explained to them, one of the things he said was this, A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet. His whole body is clean, and you are clean. I think there Jesus was really touching on this spiritual reality that we're focusing in on, that there is a cleansing that we need to be brought in to the family of God for the very first time.

We need our sins to be forgiven, that we might be embraced by God and welcomed by God. And he provides the means for that cleansing. But even when that has already happened, there is this need to keep our way pure.

There is a need to continue to be cleansed, to pick up on the words of Jesus. Not the whole body, but nonetheless, there is a cleansing that is still necessary.

So the question identifies, how can a young person stay in the path of purity, or how can a young man cleanse his way? The question identifies a reality.

We are sinners in need of cleansing. And even as cleansed sinners, we are called to keep our way pure. As our inclination, our tendency is to go in the other direction, and not to keep our way pure.

[9 : 04] So this reality, the spiritual reality that is true of every man and woman, is implicit and is identified by the question.

But the second thing that I said that we can draw from the question is that an audience is highlighted. How can a young person, how can a young man cleanse his way or keep his way pure?

Some have suggested that the young man in question is the psalmist himself, the one who wrote the psalm. We don't know who wrote Psalm 119, but it's suggested that perhaps this is a question that he's posing for his own spiritual benefit and profit.

He's a young man, and his concern is to keep his way pure. And so he poses the question and meditates on it and reflects on it and proposes an answer to the question for himself.

Other parts of the psalm could perhaps point in that direction that the author is or considers himself to be a young man.

[10:08] For example, in verses 99 and 100 we read, and he's giving personal testimony. Now, it would be a big jump from that one verse to conclude, yes, he must have been a young man.

But the suggestion of him being a student and others being teachers would maybe point in that direction. Of course, another way of understanding this is that what you have here is a section of the psalm that is intended to serve as advice, counsel directed to the young, though, as we've said, applicable to all.

But I wonder why are the young particularly highlighted? You know, why are they explicitly identified as in need of this advice and this counsel?

Well, different answers are suggested. The reformer John Calvin suggests two reasons. The first one, and I'll just read as he expresses it or as it's been translated into English, he says this, Youth puts men where two ways meet and renders it imperative for them to select the course of life they mean to follow.

And to just put that in simple English, I think basically what he's saying is that often it's when we are young that we make big decisions that mark the direction of travel of our lives.

[11:42] So often it is when we are young that we're faced with these big decisions and the decisions that we take will have implications into the long term. And so for that reason, there's a particular urgency for the young to reflect on these questions of the life that they are going to live, of the importance of a holy life, of the urgency to reject and resist temptation.

Important for all, but maybe particularly important for the young because of the long-term consequences that can come from unwise and foolish decisions when we are young.

Of course, we know that by simple observation. I'm sure even among those who are near and dear to us, we can identify and perhaps painfully recognize that foolish decisions when you are young can often have very painful consequences into the future.

And so perhaps for this reason, Calvin suggests the young are particularly highlighted. A second reason that he gives that I'm not quite so persuaded by is he suggests this, that youth are more inclined to excess and more drawn to sin.

I'm not sure if that's true. It's perhaps true that there are particular sins that the young are more tempted by than those who are older. That may be true.

[13:15] I think of maybe when I was young, I would have been more tempted to go with the crowd, more tempted to adapt my behavior so that I would be well thought of by others.

When you're young, you're tempted more in that direction than perhaps when you're older. Now, I don't care what people think. Now, that's maybe just because, that's maybe not maturity, that's maybe something not so good.

I don't know. But I think there are sins that you're more tempted by when you're young. So at that level, there's maybe truth in what Calvin says. But I think really what happens is as you go from one stage of life to another, you're simply tempted by different things.

Sin is as attractive when you're old as when you're young. But the sins that you're attracted to perhaps are different. Let's move on to a third implication of the question and then the answer that is given.

And that is that the question implies or serves to put on view a goal. And what is the goal? Well, the goal is a life of purity, a godly life.

[14:29] How can a young person stay in the path of purity? And it's implicit that this is the goal. This is what we want to do. This is the objective, the path of purity, remaining on that path.

That's the goal. A life marked by practical holiness. The question also implies that we're not there yet. We're aspiring to that goal, but we're still not there yet.

But the goal is that, a life where our thoughts are pure, where our conversation is pure, where our motivations are pure, our walk, our conduct is pure.

And I think we'd all recognize that when we think of all of those aspects of purity, we fall short. It wouldn't take much to self-examine ourselves, even just how we conduct ourselves in the course of a day, and pause for a moment and reflect on our thoughts, our motivations, our words, and ask the question, well, were they pure at every point?

And, you know, the conclusion, I think, is obvious, that so often they will not be. But the goal is this life of purity, this godly life. In Proverbs chapter 31, the question is posed, and we sometimes, or quite often it's quoted, sometimes somewhat lightheartedly, a wife of noble character, who can find?

[16:02] But we could perhaps pose another question, a young man or woman of holy character, who can find? This goal, held in view, perhaps lacks reality in the absence of a real life example.

What does it look like, this life of purity, this godly life? What does it actually look like? And when we think about that, or when we try and answer that question, I think we stand at a distinct advantage to the psalmist, because we know a man of unblemished character.

We know a man whose walk was always and ever pure, and his name is Jesus. We know him. We discover him. We read the Gospels, and we meet there face to face with a man whose way is pure, and was ever pure, unblemished, tempted in all ways, and yet without sin.

And so, in Jesus, we have our goal, and it might seem such an unrealistic goal. How could I ever be like Jesus? And yet, I would encourage you to take heart, because the wonderful reality is that part of our inheritance in the Gospel is that we are being, and we will be transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

That is a work that God is doing in us now. And we look in the mirror, and we reflect on our lives, and we think, well, there doesn't seem to be much progress. But God continues to work, and His work will not be frustrated, and in His time, we will be transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

[17:45] So, this goal is held in view, a life of purity, a godly life. But then also, I think the fourth implication of the question being posed is that a desire is presumed or required.

Now, if the young man in question, referred to in the section of the psalm, is the psalmist, the author of the psalm, then we can confidently assert that it is his clear and stated desire to keep his way pure.

If he's speaking about himself, then it's clear that that is what he wants, that's what he desires. Now, if this is a word of challenge to young men and women, then the psalmist makes clear that desire is required, required, it's necessary.

You need to want to keep your way pure. It's not enough to recognize that keeping your way pure is required. You might say, well, yes, I acknowledge that God requires that I live a holy life.

And that's His prerogative. He requires that of me, and so that's my duty, that's my obligation, and so I will endeavor to fulfill my duty. That is what is required. Now, all of that is true.

[18:55] It provides a measure of motivation. It's not even enough to acknowledge that living a holy life is good, a good thing.

It is a good thing. But even acknowledging that falls short of the motivation that we need. We need to want it. We need to desire this life that is being spoken of in this psalm or in this section of the psalm, walking a life along the path of purity.

Of course, this desire as necessary in achieving a great goal is true in life. It's true in many areas of life. You can think of perhaps a coach speaking to an aspiring athlete or sportsman.

They might ask the question of them, do you really want this? Do you really want this? It's going to involve training every morning. It's going to involve sacrifice. It's going to involve not going out with your friends at the weekend.

It's going to involve all kinds of things. Do you really want it? Because if you don't really want it, then maybe we should just call it a day here and now. Because if you don't really want it, then you're not going to put in what is required to secure your goal.

[20:18] And we could, you know, see that, you know, that we could multiply the examples along those lines. I think in the matter of a holy life, a godly life, it is so important that this be something that we really desire.

And it's clear that the psalmist desires a life that is pleasing to God in the immediately following verse. What does he say? I seek you with all my heart. There is a heartfelt desire to know God, to please God, to live a life that is honoring to God.

This is what he desires. And because it's what he desires, there is hope that with God's help it is something he will secure. And so the question for us this evening, the question for you is in the matter of living a holy, godly life, do you really want it?

Of course, if you hesitate in answering that question, if you're perhaps unsure if it's something you do really want, one thing you can do and I would encourage you to do is to ask God to give you that desire and with God's help to cultivate this desire.

You could say holiness is an acquired taste. It's maybe not something that immediately we are drawn to. It's not something we immediately perhaps find attractive but it's an acquired taste as with God's help.

[21 : 48] We taste of the goodness and of the blessings that accompany holiness so we desire it more and more. But then finally, the question and especially what follows provides a way that is set out and the way set out is captured by the answer or the immediate answer to the question, by living according to your word.

How can a young person stay in the path of purity? Thankfully, an answer is given. We're not simply left hanging in the air with the question. No, an answer is given by living according to your word and what that means is then developed in all that follows.

Everything that follows really is different ways of considering and pondering on what it is and what is involved in living according to your word.

How can a young man, how can a young woman keep her way pure? What is the way set out?

Well, there we have it, by living according to your word. A holy life is secured only when we allow the word of God to command, to shape, to direct our lives.

What does that involve? What does that look like? Well, again, the psalm gives us clues, points us in the right direction. We need to know and study God's word.

[23 : 07] We read in verse 11, I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. There's that knowledge, that deep knowledge of God's word that allows us in any situation when temptation rears its ugly head to be in a position to know what to do and to know how to respond, to know how to resist, informed by God's word that we've hid in our heart.

So we need to know God's word and we need to meditate on God's word and study God's word and this requires discipline and effort. It's not easy. We need to ask for God's help to understand his word.

We read in verse 12, Praise be to you, Lord. Teach me your decrees. He's asking God himself to be his teacher. He's not simply content with the word being provided by God and then he has to struggle his way through it and grapple with it and try and work out what's being said.

But no, he addresses God and he says, God, I want you to be my teacher. I want you to teach me your decrees. And so we need to ask for God's help to understand his word.

We need to value God's word. Again, the psalmist indicates the value that he attributes to God's word. In verse 14, we read, I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.

[24 : 31] The word of God valued by the psalmist is of great worth to him. We need to seek God which in turn will give an ever greater appetite for his word.

I seek you with my whole heart. The author of Psalm 119, as I say, we don't know, we're not told who the author is, but has sometimes been accused rather foolishly of Bible-olatry, of worshipping the book before the author.

The very language that he uses to describe God's word can kind of help us see why some have come to that conclusion. But the accusation when thought about carefully is without foundation because to love God's word is to love the author of the word.

To delight in God's word is to delight in God. Maybe one final question we can pose. What is the result of living according to God's word?

Well, again, in the psalm we're directed to a number of results that follow, that flow from living according to God's word. Of course, one is a pure life. How can a young person stay in the path of purity by living according to your word?

[25 : 48] If we live according to God's word, then we will live that life of holiness and purity. It's a pure life. It's a life of praise. Verse 12, Praise be to you, Lord.

Teach me your decrees. It's a life of service, of sharing with others what we discover. In verse 13, the psalmist testifies, With my lips, I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.

He shares with others. This isn't only for his own benefit, but for the benefit of others. It's a joyful life. In verse 14, I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.

And the section ends, I delight in your decrees. I will not neglect your word. It goes against the grain of what is so often imagined, the caricature of a holy life as being miserable and boring.

And yet here, the psalmist speaks of a holy life in the context of delighting and rejoicing and celebration. And it is ultimately to capture all of these things, a blessed life, which takes us back to where we began at the beginning of the psalm.

[26 : 59] Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord. That word blessed, so rich in its content, really capturing all of these elements that we find in the second section of the psalm, answering the question, what is the result of living according to God's

word?

How can a young person, how can an old person, how can a believer cleanse his life? How can a believer stay on the path of purity?

How can we, how can you and I, keep our walk pure by living according to your word? May that be our great desire. And may we know, with God's help, progress in securing that goal in our own life day by day.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We do pray that you would indeed grant to us a desire to be holy, a desire to be godly.

We would all perhaps acknowledge that it is a good thing to be holy. I can't imagine any of us here would be so foolish as to say that that's not a good thing. But we pray that there would be more than just a recognition that it is good, more than a recognition that it is something we ought to be.

[28 : 24] But we pray that by the work of your spirit in our lives, this would be what we greatly desire, that we would yearn for you and for a life that is pleasing to you.

And as you help us live that life, so we would know the blessing that flows from it in our own lives and indeed in the lives of others as we are better able to serve them and to guide them and to help them join us on that path.

And so we pray your help and ask that you would help us in these things. In Jesus' name. Amen.