

# Psalm 119:33-40

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Date: 22 September 2019

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     About 3,000 years ago, give or take 50 years, the prophet Samuel was given a dangerous commission, and it was to anoint a new king for Israel.

It was dangerous because the old king, Saul, was still on the throne and was not for budging. Now, you'll perhaps remember that God told Samuel that he would direct him to one of Jesse's sons as the king chosen by God.

As the account tells us, Samuel arrived at Jesse's household, and the sons were duly lined up for inspection. And as Samuel was drawn to one or other, God spoke to him and made clear to Samuel a timeless principle upon which God operates.

He did then, and he does now. These are the words that I think will be perhaps familiar to some or many of you. The Lord doesn't look at the things people look at.

People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. What matters to God, what should matter to us, what really matters in life and faith is the heart.

[ 1 : 2 1 ]     Now, clearly from the heart flows life and behavior, but the core matter, the matter of greatest importance is the heart.

It is the heart that God looks on. We sometimes speak of heart religion as religion that is genuine and experiential. As God is interested in the heart, so God works in and molds our hearts.

Now, this is the experience of believers across generations. The testimony of John Wesley, the Methodist preacher and hymn writer, is also perhaps familiar to some of you.

And I'll just read his own words of testimony of coming to faith in Jesus. He famously writes, Perhaps those are the words that are most memorable or familiar.

I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation. And an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

[ 2 : 4 9 ]     Now, while we must and do acknowledge that there's no one model experience of conversion, of coming to faith in Jesus, that all must replicate, that all must replicate, it is the case that the Christian life begins with a work of God in the heart of man, in the heart of men and women.

And Christian discipleship is grounded in and flows from the continuing work of God in the hearts of his people. So, the psalmist who wrote the psalm that we're giving thought to this evening, he was in no doubt as to the critical importance of the heart, of his heart, in his life of faith and service.

The pivotal plea that he makes to God in this section of the psalm, and in this section of the psalm he makes many pleas to God. He asks for many things of God, but at the very heart of all that he asks is the central petition, central even in terms of the arrangement of the psalm in verse 36.

Turn my heart towards your statutes. Turn my heart towards your statutes. The psalmist knew that this was of critical importance if he were to live a life that was pleasing to God and useful for God.

Turn my heart towards your statutes, towards yourself. Turn my heart. Obedience to God, a key theme in this section, is a matter of the heart.

[ 4 : 17 ] You can know the Ten Commandments, and indeed all the others, off by heart, but if your heart is not in it, you will be incapable of keeping the very commandments that you know off by heart.

Let's try and draw out some key truths and instruction and challenge and encouragement from what the psalmist shares with us of his experience as he prays to God, recorded here in this section of the psalm.

It's a little difficult, or at least I've found it a little difficult, to neatly divide this section of the psalm in subsections, but we'll work with the following two headings that don't actually cover the whole psalm, or the whole section of the psalm, but the bulk of it.

First of all, we're going to think about what he wants, what the psalmist wants, what he wants, and focusing our attention and considering that on verses 33 to 35.

What is it that he wants? But then we'll also consider what he needs. What does the psalmist need? What he wants and what he needs. And really the division isn't quite as neat as I'm suggesting, but it's a working arrangement that will help us consider this section of the psalm.

[ 5 : 29 ] So, what he wants, verses 33 to 35, and what he needs, verses 36 to 38. We'll start with what he wants. What the psalmist wants, what he desires, is, of course, a matter of the heart.

What you desire is determined by your heart. And what does he want? Well, he wants to obey God. This is what he wants to do.

He wants to render to God what we might call, or a phrase I'm coining, we might call quality obedience. Obedience that is rich and deep.

And to be clear, biblical obedience is about life. It's about walking the way and living the life. The very language of the psalm emphasizes that very vividly, very visually.

Teach me, O Lord, verse 33. Teach me, O Lord, the way of your decrees. Not just your decrees, but the way of your decrees. It's about walking. It's about living. It's about Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday.

[ 6 : 31 ] It's about studying and work and play. It's about living, life, walking. Teach me, O Lord, the way of your decrees. In verse 35, direct me in the path of your commands.

So, it's not just about a head knowledge of what we read in the Ten Commandments or in the Bible from beginning to end, God's requirements of us.

Of course, that's very important. But they all have as their intention, as their purpose, that we might live in the manner which God would have us live, that we would walk the walk, to use the expression that is sometimes used.

And I want you to notice three features or aspects of this quality obedience, as we're describing it, that the psalmist desires above all else. And let me suggest that the three aspects that we can draw from this part of the section are these.

The obedience that he would render to God, that he wants to offer to God, is lifelong, it's wholehearted, and it is delightful. Lifelong, wholehearted, and delightful.

[ 7 : 38 ] Verse 33, Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end. Particularly that purpose statement, what the psalmist aspires to, that I may follow it to the end.

To obey to the end, to the bitter end or the sweet end, whatever it might be, is not an easy task. Lifelong obedience is tough.

You know that. But it's what matters, and it is possible. God doesn't call us to that which is impossible for us. What he demands of us, he also equips us for and enables us to achieve.

And this is the kind of obedience that the psalmist longs to offer, to render unto God. Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees. Why? That I may follow it to the end.

To the end, until my last breath. That is what I most desire. That is the kind of obedience I want to render to you. Not sporadic obedience, not some moment of heroic obedience that I can be proud of and rest in my laurels in, but persistent, persevering obedience to the end.

[ 8 : 57 ] What about you? What about us? What would you most want to testify to on your deathbed? May it be words along these lines.

By the grace of God, I have kept the faith. I have followed, imperfectly but sincerely, to the end. What does he need in order to do this?

Well, he needs to be taught. Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end. He needs to be taught, but he also, and this is maybe so obvious, but I'm going to make the point anyway.

He needs to be taught and to pay attention, to learn and to apply, to do what he is taught. And I think sometimes it's true of many of us that we are taught maybe quite a lot, but do we pay attention to that which we are taught?

When we read the Bible, when we listen to a sermon being preached, when we're participating in a Bible study, and there are so many ways in which we are taught God's Word. But to what extent are we careful in paying attention to that which we are taught?

[ 10 : 04 ] Maybe I could illustrate it with an illustration that may be a little bit silly, but maybe can get across a point. Imagine if you were making your way to the train station in a town that you were unfamiliar with, and you have a train to catch, you want to make sure you get to your destination, and so you approach a stranger and ask for directions.

And it turns out you're fortunate because the stranger you approach proves very helpful, and he takes out a piece of paper, and he draws a wee map, and he notes down the directions that will enable you to reach your destination and catch your train, and he gives you a little bit of paper.

Now imagine if you were to take the map, take the little bit of paper that he very kindly has provided for you, you were to take it up, you were to check it in the bin, and then you were to ask the same person again and say, could you please give me directions to the train station?

And you say, well, that's ridiculous. How could you possibly be so discourteous? How could you be so foolish just to do that? You've already been told. You've been taught. You've got in your hands what you need to arrive at your destination.

I wonder if in a way or in a small way that illustrates what we are sometimes like with God and with his teaching. He teaches us. He directs us.

[ 11 : 24 ] He shows us the way. And yet we tear up the piece of paper and we throw it away and then we say, God, teach me. Help me. Show me the way that I am to go.

So the obedience, the quality obedience that he wants to render to God is, first of all, lifelong obedience. But I think a second characteristic of it or aspect of it is that it is wholehearted obedience.

Verse 34, give me understanding so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Obey it with all my heart. This is the first explicit reference in the section to the heart.

And the psalmist doesn't just want to keep God's law as perhaps an exercise in ticking boxes and saying, well, I've kept that one and I've kept that one and I've kept that one. And so I can be fairly relaxed that I've pretty much covered all the bases.

I was, some of you know, we were in Israel a couple of weeks ago and we would sometimes see some of the ultra-Orthodox Jews in their clothing that you'll be familiar with, their black hats and what have you.

[ 12 : 35 ] And one of the things that they have, the adults and the children, are little tassels at the side of their hips, I suppose. Little strings that come down. And if you, I think it's in Deuteronomy that you find what the origin of that is.

And it was explained to us that these tassels represent, and I think I've got the number right, 518 laws that they have to be careful to obey every day.

That's a lot of laws. And it's not for me to judge the motivation that might lie behind those who are seeking to obey all of these laws. But it's difficult not to imagine that for many it becomes just a very burdensome, box-ticking exercise.

How many can I obey? And I would imagine a very thankless one, as if there's any real, genuine sensitivity. You can come to the end of the day and you can only conclude that there have been countless that you have not been successful in obeying.

What the psalmist wants to render to God is wholehearted obedience. Obedience that reflects a passion for God with all my heart.

[ 13 : 45 ] Obedience is His passion. Not just a burdensome duty, but His passion. Pleasing God is His passion. What does He need in order to render to God wholehearted obedience?

Well, He needs understanding. Give me understanding so that I may keep Your law and obey it with all my heart. It can be difficult sometimes to know what God requires of us.

There may be occasions, and there are occasions when we have a genuine desire to be faithful to God, to be obedient to God, and yet in a given circumstance we don't know what to do. We're not sure what the right thing to do is.

Life is complicated, and there are circumstances where it's difficult to know. Sometimes it's very clear. The problem isn't that we don't know. It's that we don't want to obey. But there are occasions when we don't know what the right thing to do is, and we require that God would grant us understanding, that we would know what to do, and indeed have the desire to do so.

Lifelong obedience, wholehearted obedience. But the third aspect of this obedience, this quality obedience, that I want to draw out or highlight is what I'm calling delightful obedience.

[ 14 : 57 ] Verse 35, Direct me in the path of Your commands, for there I find delight. For there I find delight. Where do you find delight?

There I find satisfaction. There I find deep happiness. There I find delight. The Westminster divines who bequeath the church with our confession of faith and catechisms are perhaps sometimes portrayed as a somber crew, but that is a baseless caricature.

We're familiar with the question and answer with which the shorter catechism begins. Perhaps if there's just one question and answer that we know of by heart, it's this one.

Hopefully there are more, but if there's one, I imagine it's this one. What is man's chief end? What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever, to enjoy God, to delight in God.

This is what the psalmist is speaking about here when he speaks about being directed in the path of God's commands. For there I find delight. What does he need in order to render to God this kind of obedience?

[ 16 : 38 ] Well, he needs direction. As he treads the path of obedience, he needs to be directed and guided and upheld. And as he is directed, he delights in the path of piety.

Again, what about you? Is this the obedience that you want to render to God? Obedience that is lifelong and persevering. Obedience that is wholehearted. And obedience that is delightful.

Delightful in your own experience. Well, let's move on to the second heading that I indicated a few moments ago. Not only what he wants, but moving on to what he needs.

And spending a little time on some of what we find from verse 36 through to verse 38. And what the psalmist needs is a heart that is turned to God.

We've noted the verse 36 and how it begins already. Turn my heart towards your statutes. Turn my heart towards you and towards your statutes.

[ 17 : 39 ] As we were thinking about, or as I was trying to think about kind of the order of things, there is a bit of a chicken and egg thing going on here. We've identified that the psalmist wants to offer to God obedience that is lifelong, that is wholehearted, that is delightful.

And for that, we're now going to contend he needs his heart to be turned to God. That's what he needs. If he's going to render the obedience that he wants to render to God. But of course, the very desire to render to God quality obedience is evidence of a heart that is already turned to God.

And I guess as we kind of try and work out what's going on there, I guess it's a reminder that we need our heart to be ever turned to God. It's not enough, to use Wesley's language, to have our heart strangely warmed on one memorable occasion.

But to have our heart ever warmed by God and ever turned to God. Well, let's think about this matter of our hearts turned toward God and his statutes.

Turn my heart towards your statutes and not towards selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things. Preserve my life according to your word.

[ 18 : 56 ] Life is about choices. And the Bible, time and time again, urges us to choose well. In this verse, we have two alternatives placed before us in these two verses.

You have, first of all, the alternative of God's statutes or selfish gain. There we have it in verse 36. Turn my heart towards your statutes and not towards selfish gain.

These are the two alternatives placed before us. God's statutes or selfish ways or selfish gain. And really, that's a choice between God's way or my way.

Selfish gain is my way. Doing what I want to secure profit or advantage for myself. And so that's the choice to be made. God's way or my way.

And that same basic choice is found in the following verse. Turn my eyes away from worthless things. Preserve my life according to your words. Are you to choose a life of worth?

[ 19 : 59 ] A life that is pleasing to God? Or a life that is worthless? That is consumed by worthless things? That worships worthless things?

The choice really is the choice that has ever faced God's people. And not just God's people. That faces all men and women. The choice between worshipping the living and true God or worshipping idols of our own making.

And that's the choice that we need to make. And the world places a huge price tag on that which is worthless. On the worthless things that the psalmist speaks of.

And often consigns as of no value. Consigns to the rubbish tip that which is priceless. And the warning, the care that we need to take is that we would choose well.

But how are we to decide between God's way and our way? Between a life of worth and a life that is worthless? Are we able to choose wisely by ourselves?

[ 21 : 02 ] Or resting in our own wisdom? Well, we're not. Hence the plea of the psalmist. Turn my heart towards your statutes. And not towards selfish gain. There's an implicit acknowledgement by the psalmist that if it were up to himself, he would veer towards selfish gain.

If it were up to himself, that is what he would embrace. That is what he would chase after. And so he makes this plea of God. God, help me not to be drawn in that direction. Turn my heart to yourself.

Turn my heart to your statutes. I need you to help me in this. I can't do this by myself. Turn my heart to yourself.

This is something that we can and must pray often. God, turn my heart to you. Turn my heart to your ways. So he needs a heart that is turned to God.

But I think we can also identify one other thing about what he needs in verse 38. He needs a heart that fears God. Verse 38, we read, Fulfill your promise to your servant so that you may be feared.

[ 22 : 07 ] Now we've talked a lot about, on the basis of the language of the psalmist himself, we've talked a lot about delighting in God. Delightful obedience. And now we have this language that seems to be somewhat different and almost language that doesn't sit easily with the language of delighting in God.

We're speaking about the need to have a heart that fears God. And perhaps you might struggle to see how a heart that delights in God can also be a heart that fears God. And if that's something that you struggle to kind of get your head around, well, you're not alone.

Curiously, just this week, I don't know in what context, I noticed a quote or a Twitter feed from Kanye West.

Kanye West, I'm informed, has just this week, or Forbes magazine has informed us this week that he's surpassed Jay-Z to become the highest paid hip-hop artist in the world.

Now last year, and this is really what drew my attention to the musician in question, Kanye West chose the medium of Twitter to enlighten us with his theological musings on this matter of fearing God.

[ 23 : 22 ] And I'll just read the tweet that he tweeted. And I quote, I don't ascribe to the term and concept of God-fearing. That's a dated mentality that was used to control people.

We are in the future. I'm not sure what that means, we are in the future, but anyway. If God is love, and love is the opposite of fear, then to fear God makes no sense. So that's the idea.

You can't have a God who's love, and also that that God would be a God that we need to fear. Now, Kanye's problem is that he doesn't know, he doesn't understand the biblical concept or definition of, and indeed motivation for, fearing God.

Notice the verse that we have before us. Notice the logic of the verse. Fulfill your promise to your servant so that you may be feared. The fear that the psalmist speaks of is grounded not in a fear of being punished by a punitive, tyrannical God, but it is a fear that is grounded in the faithfulness of a promise-keeping God.

The logic of the psalmist is, show me how you keep your promises. Keep your promises in my life. Show me how faithful you are, and as I recognize your faithfulness, as I witness how you keep your promises, so that will lead me to fear you, to stand in awe of your faithfulness.

[ 24 : 51 ] That is what motivates, that is what provokes fear in the psalmist. Fulfill your promises to your servant so that you may be feared.

When we think of that, when we think of God's faithfulness and God's keeping of promises, and we think of our own life and in the life of the church that we form a part of, when we think of God's promises in history and in redemptive history, what is the most awesome, most fearful, if you wish, demonstration of God keeping His promises to His people?

Well, it's at the cross. It's at the cross that we witness the most awe-inspiring promise-keeping of God. He promised to save us. He promised to send a Savior.

He promised to rescue us from our sins, and He keeps His promise. He kept His promise most powerfully, most awesomely, most fearfully at Calvary.

And so we look to the cross, and we acknowledge His faithfulness, and that provokes in us that awe, that respect, that honor, that fear of God that lies alongside the delight in God that the psalm also speaks of, what the psalmist wants and what the psalmist needs.

[ 26 : 13 ] Let's go back to where we began with that question. What do you want? What is your deepest desire? Well, may it be to render to God quality obedience, obedience that is lifelong to the end, obedience that is wholehearted, and obedience that is delightful, obedience that you can delight in.

And may God so work in your heart that it might be ever turned to Him, and may it ever be marked by a fearful awe of His faithfulness.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the experience of the psalmist, and how he opens up his heart in sharing with us how he prayed to You.

We ask that we would know something of that desire that he verbalizes in the psalm, that it would be for us that which we most desire, that the obedience that we render to You, that we offer to You, would be quality obedience.

Help us to persevere to the end. Help us to obey You with all our hearts. Help us to find delight in the way of Your commands. And we do ask that You would turn our hearts towards You, turn our hearts towards Your statutes and Your precepts.

[ 27 : 43 ] Help us to acknowledge and witness and delight in Your keeping of the promises that You have made to us. And as we see that faithfulness in Yourself, so we would indeed fear You and acknowledge You as the awesome, promise-keeping God.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing now. We're going to sing this section of the psalm that we've been given some thought to this evening.

Psalm 119 from verse 33 to verse 40. We're going to be singing to the tune, Truro. Teach me to follow Your decrees, then I will keep them to the end.

Give insight, and I'll keep Your law with all my heart to it attend. Let's stand and sing. Let's bathe. Amen. So let's have the psalm that we may sing.