



July 24, 2024

# MESSENGER

## QUOTE FOR TODAY

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

Hebrews 13:8

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## Read This in a Mirror

You'll see that every one of the eight lines begins with the same-shaped mark (Hebrew reads from right to left). That's an *aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. These are the first eight lines of Psalm 119 in its original Hebrew. Each of the next eight lines begins with a *beth*, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet; the next set of eight lines begin with *gimel*, the third letter, etc. Since there are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, this Psalm is 176 (22 X 8) verses long. That makes it the longest chapter in our Bible.

Why did the Psalm writer go to all this linguistic effort? Because he thought the subject he was writing about was applicable to every situation in every moment of life and was, therefore, worth celebrating. The acrostic use of the alphabet was clearly designed as a way young students could memorize the important truth at the center of the Psalm.<sup>1</sup>

That central truth in Psalm 119 is that **God has revealed himself through the written Word treasured by his people.** For the writer three to four hundred years before Christ, that Word was contained especially in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, but also in the Prophets and the other Writings accepted as authentic revelations of God. For us, living more than 2,400 years later, God's Word includes the Old and New Testaments that make up our Bible.

Every one of the 176 verses of Psalm 119 expresses a prayer to God, ranging from praise to petition. And the repeated theme is how blest we are to have God speaking to us, revealing himself to us, expressing how much he cares about us. Ten Hebrew words are used over and over again to describe this written revelation from God. They are translated by the English words *Law, Testimony, Word, Way (Path), Precepts, Statutes, Commandments, Judgments, Righteousness, Ordinances.* Each of these terms emphasizes one particular way God speaks to us in our life journey, addressing our behavior, choices, family life, career, friendships, sins, failures, challenges, self-assurance, etc.

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The psalmist used all these different words to describe the Bible in order to show how many nuances and facets there are to how God's Word speaks into our lives. This is the opposite of the way *prooftexts* are used by Biblical literalists. Any quote from Scripture is read, interpreted and applied in a one-size-fits-all way, whether it comes from the Old Testament Book of Lamentations or Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. To these people, the context doesn't matter, nor does the time, culture or circumstances in which the statement is expressed.

Actually, it matters a great deal that **we read and understand God's Word in the way he intended**. Otherwise, we'll miss his message to us. In some cases, the Bible is clearly to be read as settled *Law*, in others as direction toward the right *Path*, in still others as a *Word* of encouragement. The psalmist uses his varying words to remind us of that.

Let me suggest that you begin a personal devotional series on Psalm 119. Instead of trying to read and digest all 176 verses at once, take just eight verses at a time --- the eight that begin with the same Hebrew letter. *Meditate* on them (the word *meditate* is used 8 times in the Psalm). Try to discover if there is any common theme the psalmist is trying to express through these eight verses. Think about how you can make this exposure to the Bible relate to your life today. Tomorrow, focus on the next eight verses.

See you in 22 days!

Pastor George Van Alstine

<sup>1</sup> Other Bible passages where an alphabetical pattern is used to aid the reader's memory are: Lamentations 3, Psalms 111 and 112.