

DAILY DEVOTIONAL THURSDAY, JULY 23rd

Dear Christian Friends:

129 *Your decrees are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them.*
130 *The unfolding of your words gives light;
it imparts understanding to the simple.*
131 *With open mouth I pant, because I long for your commandments.*
132 *Turn to me and be gracious to me,
as is your custom toward those who love your name.*
133 *Keep my steps steady according to your promise,
and never let iniquity have dominion over me.*
134 *Redeem me from human oppression, that I may keep your precepts.*
135 *Make your face shine upon your servant,
and teach me your statutes.*
136 *My eyes shed streams of tears because your law is not kept.*

Psalms 119:129-136

This portion of Psalm 119 is the 17th of 22 stanzas. That's one heck of a long poem.

There are 22 stanzas because there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet; each stanza is 'dedicated' to a letter and each line of the stanza begins with that letter. This psalm's author was really glad he was Hebrew and not Cambodian; there are 74 figures in the Khmer alphabet. I'm glad he was Hebrew, too!

The subject of the whole psalm, all 176 verses is *torah*, and it can seem pretty repetitive pretty repetitive. *Torah* can have a range of meanings; it is used specifically to refer to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Since it is often translated as "law", the *torah* in this sense has become "rules that must be followed." We tend to think of the 10 Commandments; Jewish scribes would also include the 603 other laws contained in the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – moral and religious obligations and civil laws. We have come to see the law/commandments/*torah* as something to be acted upon, something we DO.

But its basic meaning is "teaching" or "instruction." And far from being "law", the *torah* was given to the people of Israel rescued from Egypt as a gift of grace from God. It was to teach, to form, to shape the relationship between the people and their incredibly powerful and responsive God; it would act upon them. This was completely unknown in the religious milieu of the ancient near east. No longer would people have to wonder what their God wanted to them to believe and care about, how God wanted them to relate to the Lord, to each other, and to creation: here it is, completely spelled out!

So if we think *tora* is simply something we "do," that obligatory sense undercuts its transformative capacity *on us*—or perhaps better yet, God's capacity to transform us *through* it.

When I was a senior in high school, I never had a curfew. (Gasp!) But there was the "rule", the understanding, that however late I stayed out Saturday night, I would be in church on Sunday morning at 8:30 am. I never missed a Sunday service; by following the "rule" I learned that my parents trusted me to make appropriate decisions, that worshipping together was an important part of our family relationship, and that few things were really worth feeling blah the next day. Valuable lessons!

The psalmist says the teachings of God are wonderful, enlightening, freeing and promise-filled. How have they shaped you?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwCPX-gzPyw>

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