

DAILY DEVOTIONS -- MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2020

Pr. Julianne D. Smith, Director for Evangelical Mission, Northeastern Ohio Synod, ELCA

Psalm 119:65-72 (NRSV)

- ⁶⁵You have dealt well with your servant, O Lord, according to your word.
⁶⁶Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments.
⁶⁷Before I was humbled I went astray, but now I keep your word.
⁶⁸You are good and do good; teach me your statutes.
⁶⁹The arrogant smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts.
⁷⁰Their hearts are fat and gross, but I delight in your law.
⁷¹It is good for me that I was humbled, so that I might learn your statutes.
⁷²The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.



"The longest chapter in the Bible!" That was a line from a book by novelist Frank Peretti, regarding the advice a pastor gave a young woman looking for help. The pastor told her to read Psalm 119. A man who overheard the conversation was bamboozled by that advice. It was clear she didn't know much about the Bible, but this was to be her starting point? What was the pastor thinking?

To be honest, it wouldn't necessarily be my first choice either. Psalm 119 is designed as an anagram based on the Hebrew alphabet. Each set of 8 verses follows a letter of the alphabet. If you look in the ELW you can see the Hebrew names for each section. The emphasis of this psalm is the law of God. The problem is that our word for "law" does not encompass the Hebrew meaning which is more about God's instruction for us. So no, it might not be my first choice to set before someone seeking pastoral advice.

On the other hand, if one were to read this entire chapter (as opposed to just a stanza) this person might begin to grasp the value of knowing God's law beyond the ten commandments, and beyond the legalistic viewpoint. We wouldn't be able to sing "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" without this psalm! (verse 105) We wouldn't declare: "I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you." (verse 11)

This particular stanza that we have today is sponsored by the Hebrew letter "tet" (see above) which rhymes with 'mate'. It's not that exciting of a section except for verse 70 which describes the arrogant with hearts that are fat and gross. The NIV describes them as callous and unfeeling. Either way we can see that those who do not keep God's word are not living healthy lives, figuratively speaking at the least.

We learn here that the Word of God, the Lord's statutes, and God's law are worth more than gold and silver. We see that straying from God's law is risky, even dangerous. The author sets humility against arrogance and reveals that it is better to delight in the Lord.

In this time of uncertainty as we wait for the passing of this pandemic, and watch the violence in places of protest, Psalm 119 is a good chapter to use for reflection and to ask how we can be witnesses to God's Word when arrogance surrounds us.

O God, in whom we live and have our being, Teach us good judgment and knowledge, for we believe in your commandments. You are good and do good; teach us your statutes. Where we are arrogant, humble us.
Where we are needy, feed us with your law which is more valuable than silver and gold.
Let us delight in you, through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.