

The “Waw” and “Taw” of Psalm 119

Okay, guys...when I chose these two eight verse sections of **Psalm 119** as our focus, I didn't notice the rhyming Hebrew letters. But it makes this lesson more fun...and hopefully more memorable.

What a journey I have been on in my life in Christ with **Psalm 119**! In my early years in Christ, starting at age 17, and through my twenties, I only knew the “coffee cup” (now “Hobby Lobby”) parts of **Psalm 119**. In my 30's and 40's I learned that it was a “love letter to the law,” but my understanding of “the law” was limited by its Pharisaic distortion during Jesus's earthly ministry and Paul's use of the word “law” in opposition to faith and grace in some of his epistles. I didn't understand that Jesus was not correcting the Old Testament, but the misunderstandings of the Old Testament that were prevalent in his time. (ESV *Study Bible*, p. 1969) Paul's critique of the “law” was of its misuse outside of relationship with God, a relationship that only God's grace initiates and makes possible.

Finally in my 50's, as God guided me through a devastating divorce, I started reading and praying the Psalms as part of my following of Christ in the Anglican Prayerbook tradition. That daily repetition and lectionary readings that took me through the whole Bible regularly brought all of God's Word alive for me, as Father Paul would say, “as never before.” All parts of Scripture began to come alive for me, as the Gospels and Epistles had earlier in my life in Christ. Through immersion in Scripture, especially the Psalms, prayer finally became something I actually did instead of wasting time and energy feeling guilty about never doing enough of it. What a relief and re-direction this was for me and what joy I experience in this “way of life” and recommending it to others!

Speaking of “way of life,” that's what the Torah Psalms, **Psalms 1, 19 and 119** are all about.

The three Psalms (1, 19, and 119) which in a special way make the law of God the object of thanks, praise, and petition seek to show us, above all, the blessing of the law.” Under “law,” then, is to be understood usually *the entire salvation act of God and the direction for a new life of obedience*. (Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayerbook of the Bible*, pp. 31-33, italics mine)

1. “**Waw**” is the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet and begins every verse of **Psalm 119:41-48**. (Remember that Psalm 119 is a long alphabetical acrostic in which each of its 22 stanzas begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and each line within each stanza begins with the same letter.)

Each verse of the “Waw” stanza actually starts with the word “and.” The commentary on these verses in *New Bible Commentary* offers this explanation:

This is not just a device to provide for the letter **Waw** (which, as a prefix, means ‘and’) but is the whole point of the section: ***there are things that follow in sequence***. The preceding sections have wrestled with the problems of living the pure life (*Beth*) in an alien world (*Gimel*) full of pressures (*Daleth*), and with a divided heart (*He*). (pp. 567-568)

And now what? What ingredients, important above all others, are needed for living faithfully in a corrupt world that’s full of trouble as our real selves wrestle inwardly with heart-loyalty and heart-disloyalty? (See **Psalm 119:41**)

How would you describe these ingredients in your own words? How does your current experience with these 2 ingredients inform your reading and praying of these verses?

2. What does the rest of the stanza (**vv.42-48**) show you about *making steady progress* as a person who is knowing and experiencing God’s faithful love and plenteous salvation?

What does “steady progress” look like and what attitudes and actions contribute to it? (Add “and” or “and then” at the beginning of each verse.)

Which ones have you experienced, longed to experience, avoided, feared or rebelled against? Which “steps of progress” get your attention now?

3. Let’s move to the end of Psalm 119 now, the last stanza, the “Taw” stanza, **Psalm 119:169-176**.

After all this praying and exploration about *Torah*, what are the psalmist’s petitions to YHWH and what is the mood/spirit of this person’s requests? (verses 169-170, 173, and 175-176)

Put the psalmists’s prayer into your own words.

New Bible Commentary summarizes **119:169-172** as “LORD, hear!” and **119:173-176** as “LORD, act!”

4. How do **119:172b** and **119:176b** bring this “love letter” to YHWH back to its main theme?

5. What does the last verse of **Psalm 119** have in common with Jesus’ parable of the tax-collector and the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14? How might this inform your future reading and praying of **Psalm 119**?