

A Lenten Look at the “Great Psalm,” Psalm 119

Psalm 119 is called the “Great Psalm” because of its length; it takes up a big part of Book V of the Psalms. Some scholars think it is was an original conclusion of an earlier anthology, finishing off the theme started in Psalm 1, another wisdom/Torah psalm, as is Psalm 19:7-11.

Psalm 119 starts with a blessing like Psalms 111 and 112 which are also alphabet acrostic wisdom psalms about God’s character and about the character of a wise person of covenant faith. Lamentations 3 is also similar in construction and content. Since Lamentations uses an alphabetic acrostic pattern throughout, some scholars think it and Psalm 119 might have been written at that time of difficulty. Recall that **Psalm 119** is written as an alphabetic acrostic with 22 stanzas of 8 lines each, with each of the 8 lines of a stanza beginning with the same Hebrew letter.

Most commentators observe that the psalmist uses 8 Hebrew synonyms for law and correlate that with the 8 lines of each stanza, although all the stanzas don’t use all of the eight words.

Here’s a list of the eight words: law, word, judgment/decision/testimony, statutes, commands, precepts, decree, and word/promise/saying (*New Bible Commentary* adds a ninth word, ways=lifestyle.)

Here’s a list of brief definitions of the 8 words:

1. *law=torah, used 25 times* The authority of the word and the love that prompted it are blended in the description *law*. While the word is used to show that law/torah is authoritative, at its core it means “teaching” and is specifically the instruction a careful father gives to a loved child.
2. *word=dabar, used 24 times* The word originated in divine speech; it is what God has spoken directly (like to Abraham) or through and to Moses or one of the other prophets.
3. *decision/judgment/testimony=mispat, used 23 times* This word lets us know that we are reading expressions of the mind of God. It comes from the verb ‘to give judgment.’ God makes decisions about what is right and what is wrong.
4. *statutes=edah, used 21 times*, This word comes from the verb ‘to bear witness’: in his word God ‘bears witness’ to himself, his nature and his truth.
5. *commands, commandments=miswah, used 22 times* This is the simple idea of doing what you are told to do.
6. *precepts=piqqud, used 21 times* This word suggests applying the word of God to the minutiae of life—to all the seemingly less important parts of our life.

7. *decree=hog, used 22 times* This word expresses the enduring significance of God's word; it comes from the verb 'to engrave' and points to something 'graven in the rock' for perpetuity.

8. *word, promise, saying=imrah* Like *dabar*, this word originates in divine speaking and refers to what God himself has spoken.

1. Reflecting on the above *words* used for *the word of God* in **Psalm 119**, which words help you understand, pray and apply this torah/wisdom psalm to your life in Lent 2021?

Also, which particular stanza might be meaningful for you to meditate on in Lent 2021? (I am debating between 3 stanzas, but the frontrunner is Daleth, 119:25-32.)

2. Look at what comes before and after **Psalm 119** in Book V. (The Egyptian Hallel in 113-118 and The Songs of Ascent in 120-134) What are your thoughts about **Psalm 119's** placement in the Psalter? How does its placement impact your reading of it as Lent begins in 2021?

3. **Psalm 119** often gets bad press for spreading legalism and for being the seedbed for the attitudes of self-righteous Pharisees of Jesus' day.

Read the gospel passage for Ash Wednesday, Luke 8:9-14. What verses in Psalm 119 remind you of the Pharisee? Which verses remind you of the tax collector?

Here's a quote from Tremper Longman III's commentary of *Psalms*:

Neither in the Old Testament or the New Testament is the law the key to establishing a relationship with God, for that is an act of God's grace in our lives. However, *the law is an expression of the character and will of God*, and we maintain our relationship with him by keeping it. Jesus himself affirmed the importance of the law when he said that 'not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished' (Matthew 5:18). (Longman, p. 409, *italics mine*)

4. Find the opening sentences for Lenten daily offices on p. 27 of your BCP and the Lenten antiphon on p. 30. On BCP p. 544, we are invited to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting and alms-giving; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

So Lent is not about giving up candy! It's about abandoning our self-referenced way of life more and more as we live *in Christ* for the sake of the world.