

## The Bible is Authoritative

### Psalm 119

Today we arrive at the end of our series looking at the Bible. Each and every week we open up the Bible here at Waitara Anglican and usually we work through a passage or group of texts based on a theme, but over the last 6 weeks we've been taking a step back and we've asked a question: Why is it that we open up the Bible each and every week? What is it about this book that moves us to investigate its contents? And each week we've explored one of the Bible's attributes; one of the characteristics that makes the Bible so important.

This week's attribute is the one that really gets at the heart of the Bible's importance. This week we are saying that the Bible is *authoritative*. When it comes to knowledge about God and knowledge about who we are in relationship with him, then the Bible really is the final word on those matters, the Bible really is the final reference point past which there is nothing left. Have you ever been in a game of Scrabble when a fight erupts over the spelling of a word, or whether a word even exists? What do you reach out for? You go for the dictionary, don't you? As Christian people when we open the Bible what we are doing is going straight to the final authority, and this makes us Christians a very unusual group of people.

As a human race we love our autonomy, we love being able to call the shots ourselves; authority is something that many of us put up with rather than embrace. In particular in the west we live in an age that is very suspicious of authority. Even if you come from a culture that maintains a great deal of respect for those in leadership, there is enough in every nation's history to demonstrate how power can corrupt people, how leaders can take advantage of others. In Australia we are very egalitarian in our treatment of others; I feel under no compulsion to call anyone by anything other than their first name; that's actually quite unusual in terms of the world's cultures. I tried to address the Bishop as *Bishop* but he insisted, "Call me Chris!"

What makes us Christians even stranger is our belief in one final authority only. Usually, if we do feel that we are somehow out of our depth and that we need an authoritative voice from the outside, then many of us will seek a couple of opinions and then choose the one that suits us best. But we Christians aren't really in the business of shopping around for advice. We have our source, and if we do find ourselves shopping around it's usually because we don't like what we've found there.

And if those characteristics aren't strange enough, the source we are sticking can hardly be called modern for the newest bits of the Bible are 2000 years old! I remember being taught at university, "Make sure your bibliography is up to date! Make sure you keep up with the latest opinions!" And here we are, every week dipping back into ancient wisdom, not just out of interest but in order to actually

live by it! There are so many reasons for others to view our behavior as incomprehensible!

But today I'd like us to hear from someone who is utterly unapologetic about their stance towards the Bible. Like us, they see the Bible as the ultimate authority, like us they seek to live their life by it, and like us they do so despite the dismissive attitude of those surrounding them. That person is the writer of Psalm 119.

During this series our Old Testament readings have been taken from this Psalm. At 176 verses it's the longest chapter in the Bible, certainly the longest Psalm. And it's a Psalm dedicated to God's word. If you've been following along you would have heard just how enthusiastic the psalmist is when it comes to the word of God. They make it known just how much they *delight* in God's word. They say God's word is *precious*, they say God's word is *wonderful*, they say God's word is *sweeter than honey to the mouth*.

And yet, they know that not everyone feels the same way. The psalmist speaks about the *wicked who have forsaken [God's] law*, about those who *do not seek out [God's] decrees*. Like us, the psalmist has a view of the Bible that seems at odds with the people around him. What is it about the Bible that causes the psalmist to stay committed to it? Well, today I'd like to hear the Psalmist's testimony; why does the psalmist value the Bible so highly while others have given up? What is it about the bible that means its authority cannot be ignored?

So it would be good to have your Bible's open at Psalm 119. I have a sermon outline in your bulletins, but I'm not going to follow it at all really. Since the bulletin was prepared the sermon has evolved somewhat. But we are going to jump around Psalm 119 a bit as we hear what it has to say about the Bible's authority.

Now a book can be authoritative for a few different reasons. It can be authoritative because of its *comprehensiveness*; because it covers everything there is to cover on a topic. I love being out in nature, I love exploring the environment, and a couple of years ago to help me pursue this interest I bought a field guide to Australian birds. Which guide did I get? The one with the most drawings and the most descriptions I could find. It became my authority because of the scope of its content. That's *not* the kind of authority we have in the Bible. The Bible doesn't tell us everything we could possibly know, but it does tell us what is sufficient for us to know. We spoke about that a couple of weeks ago.

Sometimes a book can be authoritative out of *habit*. *Yates Garden Guide*; my parents still use it, even though some of the information could be dated. We tend to treat websites in this way, like IMBD, Tripadvisor, Wikipedia. They're well-known and well used and so we can use them unquestioningly. The Bible may have been like that once, with people just accepting its authority but these days there is no popular consensus within our culture that the Bible is important, and even if there was it would be a fragile way to establish the bible's authority. Certainly our psalmist

didn't have the luxury of being surrounded by likeminded people so he needed to have a deeper reason for exalting the Scriptures.

And he found it by recognizing the authority of the Bible's author. This is the type of authority we have here in the Scriptures, an authority based on the significance of the author. When I was a child I loved playing cricket and I would borrow books on cricket from the library. I remember borrowing *The Art of Cricket* by Don Bradman. There's an authoritative manual on how to play the game, written by the best there ever was! It would only be a fool who would suggest that he wasn't worth listening to.

And our Psalmist knows exactly who is behind the words of Scripture. Psalm 119.13: With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. <sup>14</sup> I rejoice in following *your* statutes as one rejoices in great riches. <sup>15</sup> I meditate on *your* precepts and consider *your* ways. <sup>16</sup> I delight in *your* decrees; I will not neglect *your* word. Just glance through the rest of the psalm, can you see the word *your* scattered all the way through it? I think this is first thing that the Psalmist would say about the Bible. As well as being delightful, as well as being wonderful, the Bible comes from God, that's its first and most important attribute. Verse 89 Your word, LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. That's its home, that's where it comes from, the dwelling place of God! And so this is the basis of the Bible's authority, it's based in the Bible's authorship; they are words spoken by God himself.

Now this divine origin for the word of God means a couple of different things for our Psalmist. Because the Bible is from God, listening and obeying becomes mandatory. Verse 118 You reject all who stray from your decrees, for their delusions come to nothing. <sup>119</sup> All the wicked of the earth you discard like dross; therefore I love your statutes. <sup>120</sup> My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your laws. The psalmist is under no illusion as to what happens to those who ignore God's word; God's judgment is waiting for them.

Jesus painted a very vivid picture of this in Luke 20 with his parable of the vineyard. He tells the story of a vineyard owner who lets his vineyard out to tenants. And he send servants back with words of instruction, but tenants ignore those messages, beating the servants up, Finally a message is sent via the landlords own son, and even he gets killed. Jesus then asked, what do you think the owner is going to do? The tenants days are numbered, aren't they? In fact Jesus says the tenants themselves will be killed. We ignore God's word at our own peril, and so the Psalmist decides that holding on to God's word is the better option.

Fear and trembling is one motivation, but it isn't the only one for our psalmist. There are lots of positive reasons why God's authorship makes the Bible worth listening to. Have a look at verse 68 You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees. The Psalmist testifies that God's nature is fundamentally good; he doesn't trade in evil, he doesn't deal in nastiness, therefore the Psalmist has every confidence that God is worth hearing.

Or what about verse 160: All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal. Part of what makes God good is his truthfulness. God does not lie Paul wrote in Titus 1:2. I remember hearing the testimony of an Iranian man who was a member of the Islamic revolution in 1979. He left that regime soon after when he found out that the Ayatollah had been lying. The Ayatollah had made certain promises to his followers and when he failed to come good on those promises he turned around and claimed that he had simply told a 'pious lie'. What a wicked business to be involved in; asking men and women to put their lives on the line through the use of a lie, and then you justify it with a category that, as far as I can tell, is a completely made up aspect of the Islamic religion.

Numbers 23:19 says that God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. And so because God is utterly good and completely truthful, his words have a genuine moral authority about them. They command an audience because what they deliver is good and true. We've all come across people who've felt burnt by religion. Maybe we have found ourselves in that position. The writer of this psalm had lots of genuine complaints—verse 25 I am laid low in the dust, verse 28 My soul is weary with sorrow— and yet, he never loses sight of God's goodness, never loses sight of the joy that is to be found in God's word. Let's not lose this vision of the Bible. There is much to delight in here. This is why the Psalmist is completely exuberant about the Bible! This is why the Bible is spoken of with such fondness, and it's why the Psalmist is willing to submit to the Bible's authority.

And if the primary attribute of God's word is that it is from God, the primary response, according to the Psalmist, is one of obedience. Verse 4: You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed. Verse 44: I will always obey your law, for ever and ever. Verse 56: This has been my practice: I obey your precepts. Verse 57: You are my portion, LORD; I have promised to obey your words. Do you get the gist of how the psalmist thinks we should respond? In fact, I found verse 88 to be particularly striking: In your unfailing love preserve my life, that I may obey the statutes of your mouth. The psalmist is pleading for his life, so that he might be able to continue a life of obeying God's word. What's the point of living? To obey God's word!

And obedience brings with it some very practical blessings for the Psalmist. In verse 32 he speaks about the freedom that is found in God's word. I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding. Some translations have for you have set my heart free. A similar idea is found at verse 45, I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts. This might a little hard for some to comprehend; how can freedom be found in submission to a religious book? Isn't that the opposite of freedom?

Well, it's a freedom that's defined by something we've discussed already. God's word is freeing because it tells us the truth. Truths such as the fact that God loves us even though we are imperfect, that salvation is a gift and not something we have to earn, That disease or even our fellow humans might kill the body but God will raise us from the dead. These truths are liberating, and in the particular case of the psalmist

they enable him to have the freedom to choose faithfulness of over fear, to choose speaking up and testifying over silence. They're the two contexts for the particular verses in question here; it's a freedom to not worry about what other people think.

So in all these ways the Psalmist is quite embracing of the Bible's authority. Because the Bible is from God, and because God is good and true and because his word leads to freedom, the Psalmist find great delight in obeying it. But the Psalmist isn't the only one who is obedient to Scripture, and I'll leave you with this thought. This might come as a surprise and it hurts your head a little to think about it, but God himself is willing to obey the Scriptures. God himself submits to what it is that he has written.

This is a recurring theme in Psalm 119. We see it in verse 41: May your unfailing love come to me, LORD, your salvation, according to your promise. We see it in verse 58: I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise. It's there in verse 65 Do good to your servant according to your word, LORD. The Psalmist is reminding God that his word contains more than *commands*, it also contains *promises* which, if his word is also true, then he has to fulfill. Promises to save and to be gracious, promises which God did indeed fulfill in the best of ways when Jesus came among us to provide that gracious salvation.

The God we worship is a God of wonderful integrity. He is bound to the Bible as much as he asks us to be, and history has shown us that he's never deviated from what he's written. And so he invites us to follow the same path, to say with the Psalmist I have chosen the way of faithfulness, I have set my heart on your laws.