

SESSION 2

Knowing God



QUESTION 1:

When have bad directions or instructions really led you astray?

THE POINT

Our hearts are satisfied as we encounter God through His Word.

THE PASSAGE

Psalm 119:17-24

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Many of us have become quite dependent on GPS. And why not? GPS calls out directions as we need them, never requiring us to take our eyes off the road. This becomes all the more important when we're in an unfamiliar area in hazardous conditions.

One Canadian woman would disagree. She was in an unfamiliar area of Ontario on a “dark and stormy night,” but when she drove down a boat launch into the Georgian Bay, she discovered her GPS may not have been as reliable as she thought. She did exactly as directed by her GPS, but the GPS was wrong. She came out of the frigid water just fine, but the same could not be said for her car.¹

Thankfully, we can always rely without fail on the direction the Bible gives. It is always reliable and will never lead us astray. Psalm 119 is a comprehensive treatment of God's instruction, and in this psalm we see how the Bible produces spiritual growth, equips us to face opposition, and gives us a reliable perspective to navigate life.

Psalm 119:17-18

17 Deal bountifully with thy servant, that I may live, and keep thy word.
18 Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.

Psalm 119 is an amazing piece of Hebrew poetry. The psalm has twenty-two sections—one section for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each section has eight lines that begin with the same letter. The psalmist quilted these sections together so he could reflect on the wisdom of submitting to the Lord's instruction.

Psalm 119:17-24 is the third section (called the *Gimel* section after the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet), and it radiates with passion for God's Word. The composer pleaded for God's favor so that he "may live" and "keep thy word." The verbs rendered *live* and *keep* are both tied to obedience. The psalmist lived in order to obey God's Word. By repeating the concept with parallel words, the psalmist emphasized obedience. The goal was not merely to know or understand God's instruction; it was to live it, keep it, and obey it.

The psalmist did not view his obedience as a difficult obligation. Nor was he punching a spiritual time clock while daydreaming about something more enjoyable. The psalmist did not view God's Word as a means to merely make his life better. The Lord's instruction was his reason for life.

This attitude is in stark contrast to current Bible use in the United States. In the "State of the Bible 2019" report, commissioned by the American Bible Society (ABS), only 16 percent of Americans use the Bible every day, and 31 percent never use the Bible.² Even among regular churchgoers, only 32 percent of them read the Bible every day.³

Reading the Bible daily will do more to help you grow spiritually than any other choice you can make. It is the foundational spiritual discipline that all the others build on. Beyond the immediate benefit of encountering God when you read the Bible, the understanding that develops over a lifetime of reading the Word provides a framework for all other spiritual disciplines. Your understanding of God's will, as revealed in the Bible, helps you distinguish between God's voice and other influences.

The psalmist pleaded for the Lord to open his eyes so that he could see the awesome teachings of the law. We might read a note of desperation in his words—he was desperate to encounter God through His Word. He did not want the cares of life to distract him from what was most important to him. Because he had an open heart, he cried out for open eyes so that God would reveal His truth to him from the Word.

God does speak to people—even with an audible voice. Adam and Eve heard His voice in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8-13). God spoke to Moses out of a bush that burned but was never consumed by the fire (Ex. 3:2-6); later He spoke again to Moses from Mount Sinai to give the Ten Commandments to the people (20:1-19). Job heard God speak out of the whirlwind (Job 38:1), and Saul of Tarsus heard His voice on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-6). While only a few have heard the audible voice of God, everyone has the opportunity to “hear” God speak through His written Word.

When we listen to God speaking through His Word, we grow closer to him. In the ABS report mentioned earlier, 47 percent of Bible users say they are motivated to read it because it brings them closer to God.⁴

Biblical interpretation is a science, and it can take work to interpret and expound on difficult passages, but that effort is not enough. Understanding God's Word is a spiritual work requiring the Holy Spirit to illuminate its meaning to the reader (1 Cor. 2:10-14). The psalmist longed to hear from God, but he prayerfully looked to God to open his eyes to what He revealed through His Word.

QUESTION 2:

When has God revealed Himself to you in a fresh way through His Word?

Psalm 119:19-22

19 I am a stranger in the earth: hide not thy commandments from me.

20 My soul breaketh for the longing that it hath unto thy judgments at all times.

21 Thou hast rebuked the proud that are cursed, which do err from thy commandments.

22 Remove from me reproach and contempt; for I have kept thy testimonies.

KEY WORDS: **Stranger in the earth** (v. 19)—God’s people are only temporary residents on this earth (1 Pet. 2:11-12). Our real home is with God for all eternity (John 17:14-18; Heb. 11:13-14).

Hearing from God was important to the psalmist, especially since he knew that the world around him was not always a friendly place. After marinating his soul in the instruction of the Lord, the psalmist saw the sin-saturated world as foreign to him. He declared that he was “a stranger in the earth,” a sojourner who felt like he did not belong; he was an outsider. This world was not his home.

Strangers and foreigners were especially vulnerable in the ancient Near East. Without the kindness of others, they would not have food, shelter, or water. Towns did not have a modern-day infrastructure for transportation, housing, or dining. If the decent, kind citizens did not offer their protection and the hospitality of their homes, the stranger would be at the mercy of the mob.

The psalmist desired to live in obedience to God’s Word; therefore, he felt like a stranger in a world that felt at home with

sin. The sin-infested people around him were insulting and contemptuous toward him. They acted arrogantly—thinking they were beyond the need to follow God’s instruction. The psalmist experienced comfort from God’s Word while living in this hostile environment. Living according to God’s Word removed the sting that came from the disapproving people who scorned him.

The psalmist welcomed God’s commands and longed for His judgment, which was valuable to him. Even as he felt the insults of the arrogant, he looked to God to rebuke them. As harsh as his treatment may have been from the sinful crowds, the psalmist sought to stay true to the commands and judgments of God. His only escape from being vulnerable in a wicked land was the guidance of God’s commandments and the security of God’s righteous judgment.

The psalmist had a quiet confidence that God would straighten everything out. Though others treated him with contempt and pummeled him with insults, he knew this was a temporary condition. He knew he was keeping God’s commands and decrees, and that was what really mattered. What mattered most was not what the cultural elite thought of him, but what God thought of him—God’s judgment. And he knew God was pleased with the life choices he was making—the choices to know and obey God’s commandments.

Living God’s way is not usually the easiest path, but it is always the best path. It requires that believers go against the grain of the sin-filled culture that surrounds us, which often means we will experience contempt and endure insults. Other times it means we will face outright persecution, but we can withstand all these things as we trust God and live in obedience to His Word.

QUESTION 3:

How has knowing God through His Word helped you face challenges in life?

Psalm 119:23-24

23 Princes also did sit and speak against me: but thy servant did meditate in thy statutes.

24 Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counselors.

The psalmist didn't merely face the insults or contempt of everyday people; he experienced a conspiracy of princes and governmental officials who collaborated to persecute him. As always, God's Word, the delight of his life and constant counselor, gave him the proper perspective to face the persecution.

That's the perspective exhibited by Dawlat Abouna, a church leader with St. George's Church in Baghdad, Iraq. When asked how the church was doing in light of all the turmoil in Iraq, he said, "We have started two new groups here at the church—one to pray for our persecuted brothers in the North, and one to pray for our enemies."⁵

Bashir Estephanos exhibits the same perspective. It is well known that ISIS persecuted believers who chose to stay in the Middle East. Bashir lost two of his brothers under these extreme circumstances, but his response to the killings is astonishing: he publicly prayed for those who killed his family.⁶

These servants of the Lord do not focus on the injustices they have suffered. Knowing that they live in a depraved world, they were not surprised when persecution came; and when it came, they were prepared to respond out of their biblical worldview. They prayed for their enemies, obeying Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:44. Such a perspective could only come from knowing, living, and meditating on God's Word.

Instead of being afraid of those who actively plotted against him, the psalmist chose to "meditate in" the Word of God. He made an intentional choice to go beyond merely familiarizing himself

with God's Word by reading it; it was a choice to internalize it and meditate on it. Meditation—going over a matter in your mind—requires an investment of time to consider, reflect on, and pray about God's truths. The Bible is worthy of our time and effort.

Meditating on God's Word requires focused, deliberate attention over a prolonged period of time on biblical teachings. Bible reading gives breadth. Bible study gives depth. Meditating on the Word gives perspective. It is an intentional choice we make to join God in His work of transforming us into the image of Christ. Spending quality time in God's Word changes the way we think and respond to life.

When we meditate on God's Word, it becomes the delight of our lives and the constant counselor that guides our decisions. Then and only then will we have the proper life perspective to face the insults, contempt, and persecution coming from the sin-saturated world we live in. It provides proper guidance for life and equips us to make wise choices under pressure and even persecution.

QUESTION 4:

When has your perspective on something been changed because of God's Word?

Because the world we live in is so corrupt, it is tempting to focus on how bad things are and how unjust the treatment is that we receive. As our culture continues to jettison Christian values in favor of secularism or hedonism, some choose to focus on the contempt they receive and the insults others hurl at them. But when our focus is on how bad things are, we lose sight of how good God is. Please don't dismiss this as the difference between optimism and pessimism. This is a choice on how to allocate your time and discipline your mind. We would be wise to stop soaking in all the news and opinions from 24-hour news channels; instead we should take time to read and reflect on God's Word until its teachings become a part of our fiber. God's Word changes our perspective.

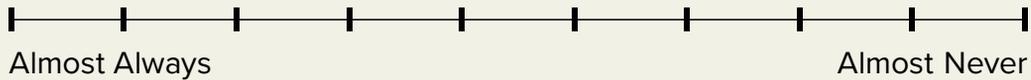
QUESTION 5:

What challenges do we face in bringing God's perspective to bear in our lives?

ENGAGE

Consider the following statement and place a mark on the scale below.

When faced with opposition to my faith, I boldly stand firm.

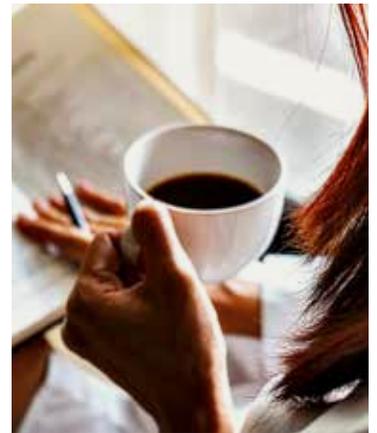


What encouragement from this session supports you when faced with opposition or rejection?

LIVE IT OUT

Unlike the sometimes unreliable GPS, the Bible is always reliable. It will provide the direction, guidance, and perspective you need to navigate this sin-filled world. How will you practice the discipline of spending time with God's Word?

- ▶ **Read the Bible.** If you're not spending time in God's Word, start here and now. Spend at least fifteen minutes every day reading God's Word.
- ▶ **Study the Bible.** Choose a book of the Bible and spend time studying its message. Your pastor or group leader can recommend a commentary or study helps to assist you in your study.
- ▶ **Meditate on God's Word.** Turn off the TV, computer, and smartphone and spend uninterrupted time meditating on God's Word. Journal your thoughts and observations.



END NOTES

1. Julia Jacoby, "Woman Follows GPS, Drives Car Into Canada's Georgian Bay," *abcnews*, May 14, 2016, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/woman-drives-car-canadian-bay-gps-wrong-directions/story?id=39115061>.
2. "State of the Bible 2019," *American Bible Society*, https://www.americanbible.org/uploads/content/state-of-the-bible-2019_report_041619_final.pdf, 8.
3. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/07/02/few-protestant-churchgoers-read-the-bible-daily/>.
4. "State of the Bible 2019."
5. Mindy Belz, "How does the Church Move the World," *World Magazine*, vol. 32, no. 10, May 27, 2017, https://issuu.com/worldmag/docs/world_may272017.
6. Jayson Casper, "Forgiving ISIS: Christian 'Resistance' Videos Go Viral in Arab World," *Christianity Today*, May 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/march/forgiving-isis-christian-resistance-viral-video-sat7-myriam.html>.