



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



# The Holy Book of Psalms

## Psalm 119 (Part 1)

### Metropolitan Youssef



# Introduction

- This Psalm has no title
- The author is not mentioned but several and almost all early church fathers said it is a Psalm of David, composed throughout his entire life
- They have considered it as a memoir, of David's life; in which he expresses all the states through which he had passed; the trials, persecutions, reliefs, and encouragements he had received
- It seems to be a collection of contemplation on the word of God and its precepts, its usefulness, distinction, and value
- More modern commentators conclude that it is post-exile, coming from the days of Nehemiah or Ezra



# Introduction

- Though some commentators assign it to the times of the Babylon captivity; yet there are so many things in it descriptive of David's state, experience, and affairs
- This is another of the alphabetical or acrostic Psalms
- There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and this Psalm contains 22 parts; each includes 8 verses
- Each of the 22 sections is given a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from Aleph through Tau or Tav and each line in that section begins with that letter
- The equivalent alphabet in the New Testament, which is written in Greek, would be Alpha and Omega (Revelation 1:8,21:6,13)





# Introduction

- The closest parallel to this pattern in Scripture is found in Lamentations 3, which is also divided into 22 sections, and a few other passages in the Hebrew Scriptures use an acrostic pattern
- The close personal relation of the psalmist to God is one of the most remarkable features of the Psalms
- In every verse but one or at most two, after the first three introductory verses God is addressed
- In all but some fourteen verses the psalmist addresses God in the first person
- It is the longest Psalm and the longest chapter in the Holy Bible



# Introduction

- Therefore, it has been of great historical interest and there have been many lengthy works written on it
- Since this is a Psalm glorifying God and His word, it refers to Scripture over and over again
- It is an extraordinary Psalm for how often it refers to God's written revelation, His word
- It is referred to in almost every verse
- The Masoretes (a group of Jewish scholars between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) said that the word of God is mentioned in every verse except verse 122



# Introduction

- Other people analyze this differently, with disagreement about verses 84, 90, 121, and 132
- But Scripture is mentioned in at least 171 of the 176 verses
- A prominent theme in Psalm 119 is the profound truth that the Word of God is all-sufficient
- The Holy Scriptures are a reflection of God's nature, and from them we learn that we can trust His character and His plan and purposes for mankind, even when those plans include affliction and persecution
- Blessed indeed are we if our delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law we meditate day and night (Psalm 1:2)





# Introduction

- Psalm 119 is an expansion of Psalm 19:7–9: *“The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”*
- The psalmist uses, throughout the Psalm, several synonyms to describe the Word of God; counted by some as 8 and others by 10
- They are not mere literal language synonyms, but refer to specific features of the Word of God



# Introduction

- They are: Testimonies, Commandments, Precepts, Word, Law, Ways, Truth, Judgments, Righteousness, and Statutes
- The repetition of the name of God, occurring exactly twenty-two times, could hardly have been without intention
- This Psalm touch on the privileges and blessedness of those who observe the law of the Lord
- Reading this Psalm reveals to the reader, David's concept of the Word of God, which has been the center of his thoughts, interest, love, and meditation, day and night
- The psalmist is one whose earnest desire and purpose it is to make God's law the governing principle of his conduct





# Introduction

- His goal is to surrender all self-willed thoughts, to submit his whole life to the supremely perfect Will of God with unquestioning faith in His Providence and unfailing love
- Nowhere does the psalmist allow law to interfere between him and God; never is an observance of external rules substituted for the inward devotion of the heart
- Through this Psalm, we can discover how the Psalmist practiced prayer
- It reveals the life of prayer lived by the Psalmist, who says: “*I am a man of prayer*” (Psalm 109:4)



# Introduction

- He does not separate the spiritual law of the Lord, namely, His commandment, or His Word, from his own worship; his prayer in particular
- The commandment is not merely instructions written in a book, or heard in a sermon, but it is a gift of the Holy Spirit
- Many think it is a Messianic Psalm; Jesus Christ, introduced in the gospel of St. John as "*The Word of God*"
- Some commentators think it refers to our Lord Jesus Christ because there are 8 verses in each of the 22 sections of this Psalm and the figure 8 is the only figure for the 'new beginning' (the first day of the week)



# Introduction

- And the figure 8 refers to 'life from death'; as the Lord Jesus Christ has risen, not on the seventh day, but on the eighth day
- And according to the scholar Origen, the use of the figure 8, has its special significance
- He says, "As the Psalm includes 22 sections; and each section begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet; the use of the letter eight times means the entrance into the perfection of purity and knowledge; for the defilement continued seven days, in which the world was counted as uncircumcised; until the Lord Christ came, and was circumcised on the eighth day, when, in Him, we enjoyed the purity."





# Introduction

- He continues and says, “This purity was realized by the work of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was risen on the eighth day, namely the first day of the new week. All of us, without exception, were purified in the circumcision of the Lord Christ; We, who, according to the apostle (Romans 6:4) , ‘were buried and were raised together with Him”
- This Psalm occupies an important position in the midnight prayer of the Coptic Church, by which the soul looks forward to the coming of the Groom



# Introduction

- In this Psalm, the church finds her comfort after the labor of the whole day and night; and sings to the divine Groom “*the Word of God*”, who comes to carry her with Him to the fellowship of His glory
- According to St. Augustine: “Although this Psalm is so deep, that I cannot fathom its depth, Yet it needs no interpretation, but only to be read and listened to.”
- The fathers of the church consider the book of Psalms as the heart of the Holy Book, that introduces to us the Word of God in a language of praise and joy, even in the darkest moments



# Introduction

## General Outline:

- The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8
- The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16



# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- 1–8. Aleph, Loyal obedience to God’s law is the source of man’s truest blessedness, and therefore the psalmist prays that it may be the permanent rule of his life, and that he may learn to understand it better
- As Jesus Christ began the sermon on the mount with beatitude; the psalmist here also begins with beatitude
- *Blessed are the undefiled in the way, Who walk in the law of the Lord,* The whole Psalm is designed to illustrate this thought, by showing what the influence of a sincere and upright attachment to the principles of the law or word of God in the various circumstances of life must be

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- Integrity of life is defined as a walking in God's law
- *the way* is Jesus Christ; the strait gate, and narrow way to eternal life; the only true way of life and salvation, in which way believers walk by faith
- In the mind of the psalmist, there is a strong and definite connection between being *undefiled in the way* and walking *in the law of the Lord*
- To *walk in the law of the Lord* is in fact to be *undefiled in the way*
- St. Augustine says, "I know what you wish, you are seeking bliss: if then you want to be blessed, be undefiled."

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- No one in the old, or in the new covenants, was without sin, or undefiled, except the Lord Jesus Christ, *“the Lamb without blemish and without spot”* (1 Peter 1:19)
- Hence, we can say that whoever intends to enjoy the beatitude, is committed to carry the features of the Lord
- He who alone could say to us: *“You are clean”* (John 13:10); for *“the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us of all sin”* (1 John 1:7); and *“He Himself is the propitiation for our sins”* (1 John 2:2)
- *Who walk in the law of the Lord*, They who abandon every other way, and choose that of the law of the Lord, as being the purest
- The metaphor of walking appears throughout the Psalm to express the sum of one’s behavior and conduct



# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- Jesus Christ Himself informs us that the straight way to eternal happiness is the observance of His law, *“If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”* (Matthew 19:17)
- The word *undefiled* does not imply the absence of sin; if such were the case, no one would be under such a category
- It means the absence of mortal sin, that alone leaves a stain on the soul
- The metaphor seems to be taken from the spots one picks up in walking through muddy, dusty, or dirty places
- *in the way*, means through life, which is most rightly called a way by reason of the constant changes in it, from the moment we are born to the very last minute of our existence

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- God's law is a straight and clear path, because it prohibits all manner of sin
- *the law of the Lord*, The psalmist uses, for the first time, a phrase referring to the written revelation of God
- The many various ways he referred to God's written revelation shows us how much he knew, loved, and reverend God's word
- Surveys and polling data constantly demonstrate that those who live lives in general conformity to God's standards are happier, enjoy life more, and are more content
- Yet the illusion remains for many that a *defiled* life is more fun

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- *To keep His testimonies* is nearly the same as to *walk in the law of the Lord*
- *Blessed are those who keep His testimonies*, in which is implied that they search the Holy Scriptures, that they come to an understanding of them, that they love them, and then that they continue in the practice of them
- *Keep* means *doing*, not only *hearing*
- It is not enough that we understand or ponder God's commandments, but we must practice them
- *with the whole heart*, With a sincere desire to know His will and to do it



# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- If one will *seek* God *with the whole heart*, it must include diligent study of God's written revelation
- God looks at and requires *the whole heart*, for if the heart be divided between Him and the world it is *defiled*
- God's laws are a channel of blessing to those who seek God with their whole hearts
- As they become more and more aware of those laws and try to keep them faithfully, they come to treasure their relationship with God even more—and are thus blessed
- *do no iniquity*, They are righteous; their character is that they do that which is right

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- Not that they are free from sin, nor from the acts of sin; but sinning is not the course of their lives
- They avoid all idolatry, injustice, and wrong
- They do not follow the wrong way and making sinful decisions
- The person is blessed who avoids these behaviors—who instead follows God's *ways*
- *They walk in His ways*, not in those ways to which an evil heart might entice them, nor those in which the thoughtless and the wicked walk

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- The psalmist connects *commanded obedience* with the blessings to the obedient
- He shows that the reason God *commanded us to keep His precepts diligently* is not only because it honors Him, but also because it is the path to blessing
- With the words *You have commanded us*, The psalmist begins to address God in prayer; a position he will hold through most of the Psalm
- This shows that he was not only a student of Scripture, but also a man of prayer



# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- *commanded us*, It is not mere human wisdom; it is not mere morality; it is not only because it will be for our interest; it is because God requires it
- They were not the *precepts* of men, but the commands of God; who had a right to command, as Creator, Preserver, Redeemer, and King
- *Oh, that my ways were directed To keep Your statutes*, This is not only a virtuous wish; it is also a prayer for the ability to obey God's word
- Apart from His work in us, we lack the ability to keep those commands

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- The psalmist, sensible of his own inability, as every good man is, to keep the commands of God, prays for grace, direction, and assistance
- The psalmist gets personal, this is not a theological paper on written revelation; it is an interaction with the Living God regarding His primary way of showing Himself to him
- It is not enough for us to be called to take the way, to have it; but we should cry out to God to keep us on it, to let our ways be upright
- *To keep Your statutes*, Ought to be the aim of the life; the purpose of the soul; and the ruling wish of the man

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- The Divine Law is as a mirror, which shows man his defects; the faithful, in looking in it, have no cause to *be ashamed*
- *Then I would not be ashamed*, either before God or man
- Shame follows transgression
- The psalmist asked God to *direct* him *To keep His statutes*, so he would not have a reason to be ashamed
- He would not be disappointed; all his hopes would be fulfilled
- He would have full evidence of mercy and he would feel assured of ultimately obtaining eternal life



# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- God is holy and wants His people to be holy
- God gave His commandments to His people as a way to enable them to move towards holiness
- Those who have a sincere respect to all God's commandments *would not be ashamed*
- Not only they will be kept from doing that which will turn to their shame, but they shall have confidence towards God and boldness of access to the throne of His grace, *“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.”* (1 John 3:21)

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- His own experience of the nature of God *righteous judgments*, and their value would lead him to sincere praise
- The more one knows of God, the more his heart will be ready and willing to magnify and praise His name
- The psalmist found it not only important to *praise* God, but to do it with *uprightness of heart*
- He did not want to offer God the *image* of praise or a *moment* of praise when the rest of his life was not upright
- God's judgments are all righteous, and therefore it is appropriate and necessary to learn them

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- It is an easy thing to praise God in word and tongue; but only those who have learned to *praise* Him *with uprightness of heart*, are well knowledgeable in this mystery
- They are inward and deep with Him in praising Him
- They sincerely aim at His glory in the course of their prayers as well as in living a godly life and practicing His commandments
- God accepts only the praises of the upright
- David talks with confidence, saying *I will keep Your statutes*; turning from prayer and supplication to joy and praise for the sake of the riches of God's grace, and His work in him



# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- This is the psalmist's will and wish and it expresses his firm purpose
- We sense the note of desperation in the psalmist
- And lest the confidence would turn into self-pride or human boasting, the way the apostle Peter said to the Lord, "*Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!*" (Matthew 26:35), the psalmist says: *Do not forsake me utterly*
- He meant to keep the law of God; he could confidently say that he would do it only, if God would not forsake him
- He knows and loves God's word yet is also very conscious of his inability to live God's word, apart from the work of God in his life

# The Blessedness of Obeying the Commandments 119:1-8



- It is as though he trustingly says: “I will keep Your statutes, for I enjoy Your free grace; Therefore, do not forsake me until the end of my strife”
- If God did *forsake* him, he would be lost
- The psalmist was so sensible of the necessity of the divine Presence and grace, to assist him in the observance of God’s *statutes*
- The heart that sings *do not forsake me utterly* is a heart that longs to be close to God
- The Psalm reveals the fact that a man who obeys the will of God as revealed, comes to a personal fellowship with Him

# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16



- The psalmist in the first part, laid the foundation which is *walking in the law of the Lord*, and in the second part (verses 9-16), he, being experienced in God's way, gives an advice to young people on how to keep the commandments
- *How can a young man cleanse his way?* This question addresses a burning issue for young people
- The case hypothetically is of a young man pondering the question how he may be saved from the corruptions of his own heart, and escape the temptations to which he is exposed in early years, and lead a pure and upright life





# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16

- The language does not imply that there had been any previous impurity, but it has particular reference to the future
- It is not how he might cleanse himself from past offences, but how he might make the future pure
- The inquiry is, how he might conduct himself - what principles he could adopt - under what influence he could bring himself - so that his future course would be honest, honorable, upright
- Some think David means himself, and that he was a young man when he wrote this Psalm; and which they think is confirmed by verse 100 of this Psalm

# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16



- But actually, he was anxious to give advice to young men, which is naturally the part of one somewhat advanced in life
- A satisfactory answer given to this question is that young men may effectively *cleanse their way* *By taking heed according to Your word*
- The word of God has such power and is of such use to *young man* whose happiness lies much in the virtue of his youth
- As we read in Ecclesiastes 12:1, “*Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth.*”
- The world has no higher wisdom than this by which to guide a young man, so that he may lead a holy life

# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16



- St. Augustine says, “But in this place the keeping of the words of God, must be understood as the obeying His commandments indeed: for they are kept in memory in vain, if they are not kept in life also.”
- According to St. Augustine, *young man* does not mean young in age
- He says, “There is another mode of interpreting it, by recognizing in the expression the younger son in the Gospel, who returned to himself, and said, ‘I will arise and go to my father.’ *How can a young man cleanse his way?* by ruling himself after the words of God, which he desired as one longing for his father’s bread.”





# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16

- *By taking heed*: A life of moral purity does not happen accidentally
- If one does not take *heed*, the natural path toward impurity and falling
- One must *take heed* in order to be pure
- Jesus spoke specifically of the power of His word to cleanse and keep us pure: *You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you* (John 15:3)
- *“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.”* (John 17:17)
- Jesus Christ answered temptation with the word of God (Matthew 4:1-10)

# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16



- *With my whole heart I have sought You:* Here the psalmist declares his dedication to God, and at the same time recognizes his weakness in being able to maintain such a dedication, *Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments*
- He acknowledges that his intention is good, but his knowledge is imperfect, and his strength is limited
- The character of the good man, in verse 2; the psalmist applies to himself
- *With my whole heart I have sought You,* Holy Scripture was no mere textbook to the psalmist; it was how he *sought* and met with God



# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16

- *Let me not wander*, Purity or any other virtue is to be understood in the light of dependence upon God, not in the sense of self-righteous pride
- The psalmist knew the value of taking God's word and *hiding* it in his heart
- It is *hidden* in the sense that it is on the *inside*, where no one can see it, and it is safe so that no one can take it away
- Before this word was *hidden in his heart*, it was received in his *mind*





# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16

- The psalmist heard and read the word of God, and thought about it continually, until it became ingrained in both his mind and his heart
- He states one benefit from having God's word *hidden in his heart* which is that it is a defense against sin
- The word of God is a most powerful answer against sin, when it has a place in the heart
- St. Augustine says, "He at once sought the Divine aid, lest the words of God might be hidden without fruit in his heart, unless works of righteousness followed."

# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16



- *Blessed are You*, as the author of such a law
- This language of doxology is an outpouring of feeling and reverence in view of such a law, so holy, so suited to direct and guide men
- The mind is full and the lips express the feeling of gratitude and joy that such a law had been revealed to people
- *Teach me Your statutes*, both to know and to practice them better
- This demonstrates the humility of the psalmist
- Though filled with God's word and a desire for purity, he sensed his constant need for instruction by God

# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16



- He did not simply need to *read* God's *statutes*; he pleaded with God to *teach* him
- God's people desire to know more of God, of His mind and will
- *God's statutes* are really known to those only whom God teaches
- By nature, we do not know much of their meaning
- God must teach us by His Spirit so we can apprehend them right
- *With my lips I have declared All the judgments of Your mouth, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."*  
(Matthew 12:34)





# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16

- The psalmist understood the importance of not only silently reading or hearing the word of God, but also the importance in *declare it*
- As the Samaritan woman who “*went to her way into the city, and said to the men, ‘come, see a man who told me all things that I ever did.’*” (John 4:28-29)
- The word hid in the psalmist's heart (verse 11) could not but rise to his lips on appropriate time and be expressed before the people for their edification
- God’s people should have His word not only in their minds and hearts, but also upon their *lips*

# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16



- The word *judgments* here means the same as statutes or laws
- The psalmist understood the true value of God's word; it gave him as much joy as *all riches* might
- Obedience to the laws by which God attests His Will is the true wealth which brings joy to life
- God's Word is a treasure, beyond expression precious, intended to rejoice the heart of all such as possess it
- Obedience is not a burden, but a joy
- The servant may perform the statutes of God, but it is only the son who *rejoice* in them



# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16

- The full force of the Divine precepts is not to be grasped except by continued meditation on them
- He will be constantly occupied in meditation and turning over in his mind all what God have commanded or prohibited
- The psalmist's life is filled with God's word, in his mind *meditate...contemplate*, in his heart *delight*, and in his habits *not forget*
- He looks unto them; take heed unto them, and walk in them, and not wander from them; make them the rule of walk and conversation





# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16

- He not only *declared All the judgments* to others, but he conversed with his own heart about them, and tried very hard to grasp his own thoughts and what he had declared to others
- God's words ought to be very much the subject of our thoughts
- As travelers look well to their ways, that they do not go into wrong ways; they observe the directions that have been given to them and keep unto them; and so good men refer to the ways of the Lord
- Which the Holy Scriptures point out unto them; *“Thus says the LORD: ‘Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it;’*” (Jeremiah 6:16)



# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16

- *I will delight myself in Your statutes, In meditating on them; in obeying them, and walking according to them; as every good man does delight in the law of the Lord, after the inward man, “For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.”* (Romans 7:22)
- The giving of the fullness of life to God’s word, in mind, heart, and habits; is a good description of what the psalmist meant by *taking heed* in verse 9
- The young man will *cleanse his way*, and enjoy the fullness of such a God-honoring life



# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16

- He will take a constant pleasure in communion with God and obedience to Him
- Having previously said that *I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, As much as in all riches*, he now says that he will be delighted; his pleasure will be derived from them, just as the law of the Lord is compared in Psalm 19, to gold and to honey, as being both useful and pleasant
- The meaning then might be, “*I will meditate on Your precepts; I will occupy myself in chanting the praises of your commandments, in order to delight myself, as I would with sweet and pleasant songs.*”





# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16

- It is not for a season that he rejoices in this light, but *"I will still, I will forever, delight myself in Your statutes, not only think of them, but do them with delight*
- St. Augustine says, "My meditation' shall be therein, that I may not forget them. Thus the blessed man in the first Psalm 'shall meditate in the law' of the Lord 'day and night.'"
- So, by cleansing one's way and give the fullness of his life to God and His word, and he will be more blessed, more happy, and more filled with life
- By frequent meditation on God's word, and pleasing chant of them, one cannot possibly *forget Your word*

# The Way Young Men Ought to Live 119:9-16



- Those that meditate in God's word, and delight in it, are in no great danger of forgetting it
- The law of the Lord is neither heavy nor severe, but it is, as the Lord Himself said, *"For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."* (Matthew 11:30)
- The advice the psalmist gives to the young man about God's word is: take heed to it; seek it from the whole heart; hide it; the word of God teaches praising and thanksgiving; declare it to others; rejoice in it; meditate in it; delight in it and do not forget it
- Any young man who attends to this advise will get his impure way cleansed; victory over his sin; and, if he abide faithful to the Lord that bought him, he will obtain eternal life



# Discussion

- What clues are there about the author and his circumstances?
- What was the main theme of this Psalm?
- What does *blessed* mean? How are we blessed?
- What are “His testimonies”?
- How are we commanded to seek God?





# Discussion

- What does it mean to walk in His ways? What are His ways?  
How can we find His ways?
- When will we not be ashamed?
- Describe the progression of the psalmist thoughts from the beginning until verse 7.
- How should our own lives mirror this progression, as we look on Scripture?

# Discussion



- What commitments does the psalmist make?
- What does his plea for God not to “forsake him utterly” show?
- Will God ever forsake His children? If not, why would the psalmist pray this?