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For the Love of God's Word
Psalm 119:97-104
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The Alphabet Song:

A You're adorable
B ~ You're so beautiful . . .
C ~ You're a cutie full of charms . . .
D ~ You're a darling and . . .
E ~ You're exciting . . .
F ~ You're a feather in my arms . . .
G ~ You look good to me . . .
H ~ You're so heavenly . . .
I ~ You're the one I idolize . . .
J ~ We're like Jack and Jill . . .
K ~ You're so kiss-able . . .
L ~ Is the love-light in your eyes . . .
M, N, O, P . . .
I could go on all day . .
Q, R, S, T . . .
Alphabetically speaking you're OK!
U ~ Made my life complete . . .
V ~ Means you're awfully sweet . . .
W, X, Y, Z . . .
It's fun to wander through,
The alphabet with you
To tell you what you mean to me.

That was "The Alphabet Song" sung by Perry Como in 1949.
The reason I introduced my time with you in this way is because our scripture passage today does something similar. Turn to the sermon notes in your bulletin.

Notice there is a strange word at the top: “Mem.” Mem is a letter in the Hebrew alphabet (you can see the Hebrew letter to the left of the word Mem). It is like our M in our alphabet. If you look further down, you will see another strange word: “Nun,” with the Hebrew letter next to it. It is like our N.

Psalm 119 is divided up into the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, thus there is 22 sections in this Psalm. Each section has 8 verses (check it out; count the 8 verses under “Mem”).

If we were reading this in Hebrew, each verse in each section begins with that letter. For example, in verses 1-8, each verse begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph. In verses 9-18, each verse begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Beth.

Thus, in our section, under “Mem,” each verse in Hebrew begins with the letter “Mem.” This is called an acrostic. Acrostics are memory devices to help learn something, such as The Alphabet song.

Of course, this did not translate into English, but our “Mem” section might look like this if we started each verse with the letter “m” (follow along with me – I’ll do the first 3 verses):

Verse 97 “My, how I love your Law!

I meditate on it all day long.

Verse 98: Making sure your commands are always with me,
they make me wiser than my enemies.

Verse 99: More insight than all my teachers have I,
for I meditate on your statutes.

I wish the translators had kept the alphabetic acrostic. It is so clever. It is a very unique characteristic of this Psalm.

Another unique characteristic of Psalm 119 is that it is the longest Psalm of them all...176 verses. And what makes the Psalm even more unique is that every verse talks about God’s word...all 176 verses (except for one; you’re assignment is to go

home and read Psalm 119 in its entirety and find that one verse. Don't do it while I am preaching, please!).

As we read our section of this Psalm today, note how many different words are used for God's Word.

Before we read, let's pray. Gracious Lord, your Word is a precious gift to us. Open our hearts and prepare our minds to hear your Word read and proclaimed. Teach us this day and draw us ever closer to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Read Psalm 119:97-105. (Note that verse 105 is not in the "mem" section, but I included it because I think this verse is lovely)

How many different words were used for God's word? Let's count:

Verse 97 Law

Verse 98 Commands

Verse 99 statutes

Verse 100 precepts

Verse 101 word

That is 5 different words for God's word; the rest are repeats in English.

However, in the original language, 8 different Hebrew words are used for God's word in this "Mem" section, one for each verse. And to make this Psalm even more wonderful: in the whole of the Psalm, 10 different Hebrew words are used for God's Word. What does that remind you of?

The 10 Commandments!

It took a long time to put this Psalm together in the manner in which we find it. Why do it? For the same reason the person wrote "The Alphabet Song;" to express something deep, an all encompassing love from A to Z, or from Aleph to Tav.

We do not know who the author is of this psalm, but whoever it is loves God's word. The author didn't say, "I read your word," or "I know your word," or "I

believe your word.” The author speaks of something deeper. Oh, how I *love* your word!

I remember the first time I fell in love with the Bible. I was 17, and had an experience with Christ. Right then and there, I decided to buy a Bible. A new version had just come out called “The Living Bible.” I remember opening it up on my bed, beginning to read, and the words leaping out at me like fire. That passion for scripture has never left, and is one of the main reasons why I became a pastor – to instill a passion and love in others for God’s word.

So, why do I love it so much? Why does the author of this Psalm love it so much?

Our Psalmist gives some pretty good reasons. God’s Word makes us wise, even wiser than our enemies. It makes us wiser than our teachers. It makes us wiser than the aged.

The Psalmist loves God’s word because it keeps us from sinning. It keeps us off the evil path. There are temptations and situations that we need to stay away from. God’s word keeps us on the right path.

The Psalmist loves God’s word because it is the sweetest thing the author has ever tasted. It brings a satisfying joy and a sanctifying joy.

Let me show you how God’s word has been a joy to me, how the scriptures have kept me on the right path, how the Bible has given me understanding.

First, 2 scriptures I use in ministry. If you have taken my classes or in a committee with me, you have heard these verses a lot:

Zechariah 4:10 Do not despise the day of small things (KJV).

How often in ministry I look at numbers – numbers of people, numbers of money. It is so tempting to do so. But over and over in the Bible, God works with small numbers or small things:

- One small stone kills a giant (Samuel 17:1-51)
- A still small voice comforts a burned out prophet (Elijah I Kings 19:1-19)

- God uses an army of 300 to beat an army of hundreds of thousands (Gideon Judges 6:1-16, 7:1-21)
- One small trumpet to break down a city's stone wall (Joshua 6:1-20)??
- A small infant in a manger
- 12 men changing the world

When just a few people show up for a class I am teaching, I take a deep breath and say to myself "Do not despise the day of small things."

And then, I remember my next favorite scripture passage for ministry: I Corinthians 15:58 "Therefore my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work of Lord, knowing that you toil in the Lord is never in vain."

Much of the time, we do not see the fruit of our labor in the Lord. But this passage promises no matter what you do for God, it is never in vain. I cling to this passage. Then, every once a in a while, God shows us the fruit to encourage us.

This is my favorite story: When I was in high school, I became an obnoxious Jesus Freak. I was one of those people who could not stop talking about Jesus. When I Was a senior, I was in an accelerated Math class – all boys except for me and another woman, Candy.

I sat in the back of the room, and Candy sat across from me in the next row. Dale, a friend of mine, sat behind me. Dale did not like God. Every day, he had a question for me about God – you know, the ones that are almost impossible to answer (especially for a high school student who recently met Jesus): What about those who have never heard about Jesus? Do they go to heaven? Why does a God of love allow suffering in the world?

Every morning before the class started, Dale gave me his question. I took the question to my mentor at the time and came back with an answer the next day. Dale was ready with another question.

Finally, my mentor said, “Dale doesn’t care about your answers. He just wants to stump you. Stop answering them.” Well, I couldn’t stop answering them, so I tried on my own, day after day.

Well, we graduated. Five years later, I decided to go to my 5-year class reunion. There was Dale. “Do you remember the math class we were in?” Dale asked. “How I tried to stump you with all questions about God?” Oh yeah, I remembered.

“Well, after we graduated,” he said with excitement, “I met Jesus. It was because of you. You took the time for me.” I was stunned and delighted.

Five more years go by, so we are talking 10 years after graduation. I was at a national leadership conference for an international Bible study I was involved in as a small group leader. We booked the entire Marriot Inn for 3 days of training.

One day, just before mealtime, I was waiting for the elevator to go back to my room. The elevator opened, and there was Candy, the woman in my high school math class. My mouth fell open. Her mouth fell open. And I said something stupid like , “What are YOU doing here?!”

She hugged me in excitement and said, “Sit with me during the meal, and I will tell you a story.”

“Remember that math class?” she said. How could I forget? “I sat there and listened to you and Dale duke it out. And one day, I went home and said to God, “I want what Diane has.”

Sitting on an end table in her living room was a little yellow booklet called, “The Four Spiritual Laws,” a book about Jesus. She took it into her bedroom, read it, and dedicated her life to Christ. And she never told me...until 10 years later.

And even more amazing, as she was standing in that elevator before it opened, she turned to a friend standing next to her and said, “Wouldn’t be great if we

could meet the person who helped bring us to the Lord?" And the elevator door opened to reveal me.

"My beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work of Lord, knowing that you toil in the Lord is never in vain."

You never know how God will use you.

* Quickly, a few more scripture passages that have become sweeter than honey in my life:

Psalm 27:13-14 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord.

Think of all the times you had to wait for something. I am not talking about waiting in line at the grocery store! I am talking about waiting for an answer to prayer. Waiting for someone to come back to the Lord. Waiting for something lost to be found. Waiting to be healed. Waiting for a job.

I waited 9 years after graduating from seminary to become ordained. Yes, I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord.

Psalm 27 also expresses my soul, and to read something in scripture that expresses your soul are sweet words to the taste:

Verse 4 of Psalm 27: "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple."

Verse 8: "My heart says of you, Seek his face!" Your face, Lord, I will seek."

There is nothing more I want than to seek the face of God.

I could go on and on, and we could be here all day, but one more. When I was a pastoral intern in my home church in Minneapolis, I was asked to spend time with a woman who was dying of a brain tumor. She was my first pastoral care

experience. All of us pastors have to go through that first death, the first memorial, the first wedding, the first baptism, the first Lord's Supper...all nerve racking experiences.

This dying woman trained me in. She gave me a scripture verse that I use today, 20 years later, to those facing death. She read it to me - Isaiah 41:10 "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you and help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

"I am in God's grip," she said. She said that every time I visited her, and it became the theme of her memorial. We are all in God's grip.

I hope some of you will stop by the sermon discussion after the service and tell me your verse that has been sweeter than honey in your life. And I encourage those of you who do not have a favorite scripture, or perhaps never really opened the Bible, to do so. To read it, and hear God speak to you through the Word because it is living.

"Oh, how I love your law!" the Psalmist says. "I meditate on it all day long." The author says that twice. Because the Psalmist meditates on God's word, the Psalmist is wise and full of joy.

We are going to take 5 more minutes. I want to end by teaching you briefly a way to meditate on scripture. We are going to do it with verse 105. I will read it several times. After each time, I will give you instructions followed by a brief time of silence for you to act on those instructions.

Hear the Word of God: "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."

Hang on these words ... let them work on you a little. Hear them again, and let them remain with you.

"Your word ... is a lamp for my feet ... a light on my path."

[Allow a few moments of silence for the meaning of these words to sink in.]

Envision yourself in the very presence of God who is speaking to you through these words: My word is a lamp for your feet, a light on your path.

(Silence)

Now, read to “see” Christ in the Word. How does Christ the Word come to us as a light to our path? Reflect on a time in your life when you had been walking in darkness ... and then saw the light.

“Your word ... is a lamp for my feet ... a light on my path.”

[Give the congregation some time for meditation.]

As you hear these words one more time, what does God want you to do with them? Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

(Silence)

Almighty God, we thank you for your holy word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. May we become ever more closely connected to you as we read your word, and may we follow your light into a life of abundant love and joy and peace. We pray this in the name of Jesus, your Word made flesh. Amen.