

Psalm 119

Today our Psalm is an excerpt from Psalm 119, the longest of the Psalms as well as the longest chapter in the entire Bible. This Psalm has a total of 176 verses (22 times 8) and is the most complex of the “alphabetical” Psalms. In the original Hebrew text, the first 8 lines start with the first letter of the alphabet, the next 8 lines start with the next letter of the alphabet, and the pattern continues for all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Because of its depth, St. Augustine saved this Psalm for last in his great work of commenting on all of the Psalms, and it took 32 homilies for him to explain it completely. He says, “When in other psalms some passage presents a difficulty, at least the obscurity itself is obvious, even though the meaning is hidden; but in this psalm not even the obscurity is evident, for on the surface the psalm is so simple that it might be thought to require a reader or listener only, and not someone to explain it.”

Psalm 119 is considered one of the “wisdom” psalms, inasmuch as it describes what makes someone blessed and the means by which someone arrives at that blessedness. The first line says, “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord!” The major theme that runs throughout the whole is how God’s teaching and commandments are the means of becoming truly happy. Indeed, in every single line of this

Psalm, there is some word which signifies God’s ordinance: law, decrees, precepts, ways, statutes, commands, judgments, promises, words, testimonies. Whereas other gifts increase wealth and comfort in a transitory way, the teaching of God which is learned, desired and lived out increases the quality of life itself. For this reason, we hear the verses today say “The law of your mouth is to me more precious than thousands of gold and silver pieces,” and “I love you command more than gold, however fine.”

Though any number of the verses in this Psalm are worth commenting on, the very last one stands out: “I have strayed like a sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commands.” After 175 verses of speaking about and praising the commandments and teachings of the Lord, the Psalmist admits that he is lost and needs to be found. Our Lord Jesus is not merely a teacher but he is the Good Shepherd who seeks out sinners who turn to him. I recommend praying this Psalm in pieces, perhaps 24 or so verses each day, asking God for the grace not only to know his commandments, but to love them and do them.