

Bible Reading: What? Why? How?

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Preacher: Thomas Davis

[0 : 00] Well, as I said, tonight we want to spend a little bit of time looking together at SAM 119. In many ways we're going to take a very general look at the SAM, but we can just read again verse 105.

This statement in many ways sums up the great theme of this SAM. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

If you've ever flicked through the book of SAMs or read it all, you will know that by a mile SAM 119 is the longest. In fact, it's the longest chapter in the whole Bible. And this great song is all about God's word.

It's about reading, knowing, and loving the truth that God has said before us. Now, for the person who wrote this SAM, whoever it was, when he speaks about God's word, he would have likely been referring to the Old Testament scriptures, particularly the scriptures of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, what we call the Torah.

That would have been, if you like, the Bible for somebody in the Old Testament era. Of course, for us now we have a completed revelation from God.

[1 : 19] But the principles that this SAM expresses still apply. So for us today, I think we can very safely say that SAM 119 is a song all about the Bible.

And that means it's a very important and helpful song for teaching us about how we read our Bibles. We'll all agree that Bible reading is a crucial part of the Christian life.

It's one of the most basic things that we do. We want to make sure that we regularly read the Bible. And I think that this SAM can help us. And that's what I want to look at tonight.

We're going to focus on three very simple headings. Bible reading, what, why, and how. We'll start in that order, but we'll spend a wee bit more time on the what.

And the last two will be a wee bit quicker. So what, when we pick up this book, you pick up this book, or when you pick up your phone and open your Bible app, what are you reading?

[2 : 24] What kind of words come to mind when I ask that question? Well, we might say, well, when we're talking about the Bible, we're talking about revelation. That's in many ways the technical word that we use to describe it, because God is revealing himself in this book.

Or we might think of the word gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Maybe when you think of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, you think in terms of history. Because this book does take us back into the past, and it is grounded in actual historical events and people who lived many, many years ago.

Often when we talk about the Bible, we'll maybe think of it as the great story of salvation. Sometimes today when people talk about the Bible, they refer to it as a drama, and we see God's mighty acts unfolding scene by scene, and we seek to fit into that.

And all of that's true. The Bible is revelation, it's history, it's good news, it's drama, it's the greatest story that's ever been told. These are the words that come to mind when we describe the Bible.

But as is often the case, the Bible itself, and Psalm 119 in particular, doesn't tend to use these words. In fact, Psalm 119 uses a whole different set of words to describe God's communication to us.

[3 : 51] And there's eight words in particular that come up again and again and again. Here they are, word, law, precepts, commandments, testimonies, rules, sometimes translated as judgments with the same word, statutes, promise.

On the beginning of the Psalm, you see these. So there's the first section that we read, I'm sorry, it's a wee bit small, but I wanted to have the whole thing on one slide. Just to show you, there you see law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, rules, statutes, word.

Seven of the eight appear in the first nine verses. Later on, down verse 38, you'll see the word promise appear, and it comes up several times as well. Now, you look at that list of words, and it's easy to think, well, that all sounds a bit heavy.

People are put off by concepts such as law, statutes, precepts, and rules. It's something that we can find off-putting. In fact, the whole history of humanity is shaped by the fact that we resist the whole idea of God commanding us or instructing us.

That was what led to Adam and Eve's first sin. Every human since then has been inclined in that way. You can see that even with children, young children, they defy instructions.

[5 : 13] If we were going to market the Bible to the royal mile out there, or if we were going to celebrate the Bible, if we were going to have a Bible month to celebrate it, we probably wouldn't use words like precepts and statutes, imagine going outside saying, come inside and hear some precepts.

Well, even with my charm and looks, I don't think it would work. But Psalm 119, this great song about the Bible, it doesn't avoid words like that for a moment.

In fact, the whole Psalm is saturated with these verses. There's 176 verses in this Psalm, words like law, testimony, precepts. One of these eight verses appears in 169 of the 176 verses.

Again and again and again, these words come up. And that, of course, is not because the psalmist is a crazed fanatic for legalism. It's because this person knows that these words describe something wonderful.

And that's what I want us to go through very quickly as we think of this question, what? So first of all, word. How can a young man keep his way pure by guarding it according to your word?

[6 : 34] Now, that word, word, is simply describing what somebody says. So when we talk about the word of God, we simply mean that this is what God is saying.

Now, there's a whole sermon in that alone because it's utterly astonishing that when you open this book, God is talking to you.

But that's exactly what is happening. You are reading the word of God. The Bible is his mouthpiece. In it, God is speaking. This is God's word.

The next word is law. Verse 18, open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. Now, the Old Testament word for law is the word Torah, which basically means teaching or instruction.

And it's a concept that lies at the heart of the covenant relationship between God and his people. Because these people are his, because they are God's, he teaches them and instructs them how to live.

[7 : 42] His law is their guide as his people. Now, notice that order. Relationship first, law second.

The law does not establish the relationship. The law is given because of the relationship. And the aim of that law is to teach and instruct God's people how to live. Now, we often think that that whole concept of law is restrictive and oppressive.

But ask yourself the question, if you think of law in terms of teaching and instruction, does teaching someone restrict them or does it make them flourish?

Imagine you were sitting in a sailing boat for the first time, I don't think I've ever been sailing in my life. Imagine you were sitting there and you had an instructor with you and that instructor teaches you and instructs you, is that going to restrict you?

Or is it going to allow you to have an incredible experience sailing this boat? Law that instructs you is not going to make your life rubbish.

[8 : 48] It's going to open the door to wondrous things. The third word is precepts, verse 27. Make me understand the way of your precepts and I will meditate on your wondrous works.

Now, that word for precepts is related to a word that expresses the idea of a duty of care, of somebody who has responsibility for somebody else.

The word, the Hebrew word that this comes from, can also mean to visit somebody, to check on them and to make sure that they're all right.

So that word precepts is grounded on the idea of exercising care. So imagine that you're a school teacher, I know many of you, many people in the congregation are school teachers or have been involved in schools in various ways.

Imagine that you're going to take 36-year-olds down the Royal Mile to have a look at all the sites. Would you give them any precepts before you left?

[9 : 54] So if you were standing just outside the church here and you were going to take these 36-year-olds down to dynamic earth at the bottom of the Royal Mile, would you say, see you there in half an hour?

Go have fun. Of course you wouldn't, you would drive home precepts and make sure that they listened.

And you wouldn't do that because you were oppressive, you would do that because they were under your care, you were responsible and you want to keep them safe.

Fourth word that comes up again and again is commandments. Your hands have made and fashioned me. Give me understanding that I may learn your commandments. Commands or commandments that they're very self-explanatory really, they're statements of instruction that carry authority.

And the appropriate response to a command is obedience. An authoritative command should be obeyed. Now there's been some very, very interesting examples of this over the last week or two in the Women's World Cup.

[11 : 00] Who's been watching the Women's World Cup? There's been lots of controversy to do with VAR, video assistant referee. Those of you who followed it or who've seen it on the news will see that things have happened in the football match and there's now a referee watching screens who can watch a replay of the event and can overturn the decision of the referee.

And there's been a huge amount of controversy. A week or so ago England played Cameroon and Cameroon refused to restart the match for a few minutes because they weren't happy about what the VAR referee had said.

As we know Scotland suffered heartbreak because of VAR. We hate VAR forever more. And there's been lots of other controversies. But I read an interview a couple of days ago with FIFA's head of referees, who's Pierre Luigi Collina, those of you who watched Italian football in the 90s will know who he is.

He's bald, very bald, very distinctive. But in his day he was the best referee in the world. He's the head of FIFA's referees. And there was all this controversy, VAR, people refusing to play, all this trauma.

There's been some new rules that have been introduced in the first of January and people have been uncertain about how they've been applied and lots of us. He said rules are rules.

[12 : 23] There to be obeyed. We're just enforcing what the rule book says. You can't decide whether you want to keep them or not. You just have to respect them. And in terms of football, he has the authority to say that.

And FIFA has the authority to enforce that. And of course without rules, football would be ruined. In terms of life, as verse 73 tells us, God is our Creator.

He's the one who's made and fashioned us. And as a result, he is the authority to give us commands. And just like in football, for life where there's no rules, there's horrible mess.

You go to a place like Somalia or Libya and see what happens when there's no rules and no commands. Fifth word is testimonies.

I cling to your testimonies, O Lord. Let me not be put to shame. Now, this is a brilliant word. The basic meaning of this word is to repeat or to return.

[13 : 35] So it's conveying the idea of an unequivocal fact that you keep on coming back to. And if you think about it, that's exactly what a testimony is. Imagine you saw someone stealing a car and you were then a witness at the court case.

If you were being interrogated and asked questions, you would keep coming back to the unchanging fact that you saw that guy on that day steal that car.

It's a fact that you keep returning to. And your testimony is simply returning to that unchanging fact. Now, I think this is fascinating because in so many ways we live in an age of relativism when it comes to truth.

So people will talk about what's true for you, what's true for me, and there's no absolute truth. But it's interesting that we live in a day where people are very happy with relativism of truth.

But at the very same time, and this is kind of ironic and it doesn't really make sense, as with lots of aspects of modern life. People are happy with relativism of truth, but at the same time, everyone wants certainty about facts.

[14 : 47] So people want certainty about climate change, people want facts about crime, people want facts about the safety of e-cigarettes, people want facts about people's private lives.

Does anybody want a world that ignores facts? And the reason we want facts is because we want testimonies that we can hold on to and keep coming back to.

Word number six is rules. Turn away the reproach that I dread for your rules are good. As we said this word for rules can also be translated judgments, depending on which version of the Bible you have.

The word is all about the concept of governing. Rules are made and enforced by those who are in government. Now, when we think of that idea of rules, it can put us off.

We think if the Bible is all about rules, then you can keep it. I don't want it. But ask yourself the question, do you want bad government?

[15 : 50] So the UK is about to have a new prime minister, Boris, or Jeremy. If one of them wins and they turn out to be absolutely terrible, would you vote for them?

Would you think bad government is fantastic? I'll vote for that. Of course you wouldn't. Nobody wants bad government. Good government is a wonderful thing.

And at the heart of that is legislation and rules. Word number seven is statutes. I'll incline my heart to perform your statutes forever to the end.

The Hebrew word for statutes basically means to engrave something into stone. It's conveying the idea of permanence and binding force. So if something is set in stone, it's of perpetual importance.

We even use that phrase still today. Now, again, we can think of that in negative terms and think, well, nobody wants to overcommit to anything. It's a bit of flexibility. But in truth, when it comes to the really important rules in life, we want them set in stone, don't we?

[17 : 03] So the right of women to vote, the right to free access of education, freedom of speech, a democratic form of government, these are things that the culture around us want set in stone because they're such a precious and an important thing.

And then the final word that comes up again and again is the word promise. That your steadfast love comfort me according to your promise to your servant. A promise is a dependent, reliable statement, one that makes a commitment and follows it through.

And everybody knows that that's a wonderful thing. And that, of course, is why broken promises are awful. So these words that Sam 919 picks, word, law, precepts, commands, testimonies, rules, statutes, rules, are they bad things?

Are they oppressive things? Of course they're not. They are amazing things.

But there's one more key word that we need to identify in Sam 119. And it's actually far, far more prominent than any of these.

[18 : 19] There's a single word that appears in 171 of the 176 verses. So same word in all of the verses of Sam 119 apart from five.

Do you know what it is? It's in that verse. It's the word your.

Your law, your commands, your testimonies, your precepts, your word, your rules, your words, your precepts.

When the Bible talks, when Sam 119 talks about law, precepts and all of these things, it's not talking about them in general terms. It's talking very specifically about God's, God's word, God's law, God's precepts, God's commands, God's testimonies, rules, statutes and promises.

It's reminding us that when you pick up the Bible, you're picking up the book of God's word. He is the one speaking. When you pick up the Bible, you're picking up the book of God's law. He's teaching us to flourish through His law.

[19 : 31] The Bible is the book of God's precepts where He cares for us, looks after us, visiting us to make sure that we're okay. The Bible is the book of God's commands. He instructs us and directs us and expects and commands our obedience.

The Bible is the book of God's testimonies, He's giving us facts that we can cling to and keep coming back to. The Bible is the book of God's rules. It's the means through which He governs His people.

The Bible is the book of God's statutes, permanent, unchanging truth inscribed by God. The Bible is the book of God's promises.

Boy, those promises are precious. All of them find inner fulfillment in Jesus Christ. When you pick up your Bible, that's what you're reading.

That's how amazing this book is. And so it's no wonder the longest Psalm ever written is singing for joy about all that God's word is.

[20 : 37] Our second question is why? Psalm 119 doesn't just teach us about what we're reading. It also teaches us a lot about why we're reading. Again, that's revealed to us through the words that the Psalm writer chose.

Now, there's a huge amount we could say here. I'm just going to pick some examples and make some very general points. We said that there's words like law and statutes and precepts that appear again and again.

There's also a whole host of words that are used to describe what the Psalmist does with God's word. Here's a section. He wants to be taught by it.

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes. Give me understanding. I'll observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments. For I delight in it. Incline my heart to your testimonies.

Give me life in your ways that you may be feared. Turn away the reproach I've dread. Give me life. In so many ways, this Psalm is crying out for learning, for protection, for comfort, for sustenance, for certainty, for liberty, for joy, all from God's word.

[21 : 44] In many ways, these kind of words that we see here, these words like teach and understand and heart and all the kind of words that you have running right through the Psalm, they point us to the things that are really important in life.

The language of Psalm 119 is bringing us back to the priorities of life. Psalm 119 is huge and we can't look at it all in any detail.

So I've just pulled out a basic summary of what I think is a selection of the issues that Psalm 119 is highlighting.

In other words, the priorities that are being set before us. I've chosen eight. I had eight words in the first part, so I thought I might as well have eight words in this part.

You've got education. The Psalmist says, teach me. He says he wants to learn. It's all about being educated. He's looking for direction. He says, lead me.

[22 : 46] He talks about walking in God's ways. There's this great idea of direction through life. The Psalm writer is looking for protection. You'll see words like guard and keep in terms of being protected.

The Psalmist is looking for support. You see glimpses of the fact that he's facing times of trouble. There's talk of oppressors and people who are threatening him.

He's looking for support. The Psalm speaks about liberty. Verse 45, for example, speaks about walking in a wide place, the idea of having freedom.

The Psalm touches uncertainty. It's talking about promises and trust and hope. The Psalms always referring to happiness. We saw that. The word delight.

We saw the words joy and rejoice coming up. And then the last word I chose was passion. Because when you read the Psalm, you'll see him use words like love and hate and heart and soul.

[23 : 44] All of these words convey a real sense of passion in this writer. Now, all of these things, I think we would agree, are priorities for life.

We think of the children growing up in Scotland, not just children who go to church, but any child in Scotland, whether they're your own or others, would you want them to have these things in their life?

Of course we would. We want them to be educated. We want them to have direction. We want them to be protected. We want to give them support. We want them to have liberty, to have certainty, to have happiness, to have passion.

These are all priorities for everyone. And as Christians, we would agree with that. But we would add another thing to the list, wouldn't we? We would add one more thing.

We'd say, well, all that stuff's really important in life, and there's one more thing that's really important, Bible reading. So as a Christian, it's really important to be educated, to go to school.

[24 : 45] It's important to have certainty in what you're doing with your career, who you're going to marry, all that kind of stuff. And also, in your routine of life, fit Bible reading in as well.

You regard it as an important thing to do. It's a priority, like all of these other things. And in our lives, we try to include Bible reading alongside all the other stuff that we have to fit in to our weeks.

And that's often how I've tried to have Bible reading in my life. I think, well, I'll just read a bit at the start of the day, or at the end of the day, or at some point when I can. So we have all these priorities, and we add Bible reading onto the end.

Is that right? I don't think it is. And I don't think that that's what Psalm 119 is saying.

Because I think the key point that Psalm 119 is making is not that Bible reading is one of the priorities in our lives. Rather, it's that Bible reading is foundational to every single one of these.

[25 : 50] In other words, it's not an item on the list. It's key and foundational to every one of them.

So if you want to be educated, if you really want to understand history and humanity and reality, read the Bible.

If you want direction in your life, if you want to know where you've come from, where you are, and where you're going in relation to eternity, read your Bible. If you want protection, if you want to be restrained from stuff that will wreck your life, or wreck your family, or your friends' lives, read the Bible.

If you want support when life is tough, and when things are horrific and your heart is broken, read the Bible. If you want liberty, true liberty, where you start becoming everything you are made to be, then read the Bible.

If you want certainty, certainty about truth and morality and hope, read the Bible. If you want happiness, if you want that joy that circumstances cannot steal away from you, read the Bible.

[26 : 56] And if you want a passion, if you want to find real meaning and purpose and depth in your life, read the Bible. Now, you might be thinking, well, Thomas, it's dead easy to say that.

It's the kind of stuff that Christians say. But it's just words, isn't it? Well, I don't think it is just words, because I think we can test all of that.

In terms of being educated about life and humanity, it's fascinating. Culture's default is to think that humanity is functionally brilliant, but ontologically incidental.

Now, when I say ontologically, what I mean is in terms of somebody's being, their existence. So humanity, culture's default is to say, humanity is functionally brilliant.

We're really capable. We can do loads. We're improving all the time. Humanity is this marvelous, wonderful thing. But ontologically, in terms of the big picture of the meaning of life, we're just cogs in a machine.

[28 : 04] And ultimately, there's no meaning. So we're functionally brilliant, but ontologically incidental. The Bible says that humanity is ontologically precious, but functionally broken.

If you turn on the news when you get home, tell me which one do you think is true? In terms of direction, culture says, live for today. Your card in school, get a house, get rich, retire, enjoy life, die.

The Bible says, live for eternity. And if eternity is real, which one matters more?

In terms of protection, culture says, go down a road where you can basically do whatever you want. Just cover your tax. Go indulge. Indulge in alcohol.

Indulge in sex. Go for it. Experiment. Indulge, enjoy. Go down that road. The Bible says, don't go down that road.

- [29 : 12] Stay within the boundaries. Stay safe. Prevent these things rather than cure them.
- In terms of support, culture can take our mind off things. The Bible says, God will hold you forever.
- In terms of liberty, culture says, do what you like. The Bible says, do what you're made for. In terms of certainty, culture changes all the time.
- The Bible doesn't. Culture says, death is unavoidable or mortality is impossible. The Bible says, eternal life's a free gift.
- And all you have to do to receive it is trust in Jesus. Which one's better? In terms of happiness, culture can give us many smiles.
- [30 : 08] That's absolutely true. The Bible promises us joy that will never end. In terms of passion, culture will give you many things to be passionate about that are good.
- Sport, music, travel, career, these things are great. But the Bible gives you two great priorities that should shape the whole of your life. Love God and love people.
- Everything else comes after that. Now I tell you, at every test, God's word just, it just thumps the world if you like.
- No comparison. No comparison. No wonder the Psalm says, oh Lord, how much I love your law.
- It's easy to think that Bible reading is a kind of add-on in other parts of our lives, but it's not true. We don't read the Bible because it's an add-on for Christians.
- [31 : 17] We read the Bible because it's the key to everything. Our last question very briefly is how.
- It's important to think about the what. This is God's word, and it's so good. It's important to think about the why because we need it to understand ourselves and to understand life.
- But finally we come to the how, and often this is where we get bogged down because when it comes to the practicalities of Bible reading, we find ourselves thinking, well, how often should I do it? How much should I do it? Should I do it in the morning?
- Should I do it in the evening? Should I do it both? Should I read a whole chapter? Should I read two chapters? Should I read the Bible in a year? I forgot to read yesterday. Should I try and do double today? I haven't done it for a few days now.
- I'm a bit behind. Should I do more? We can get bogged down in all these questions, and we can tie ourselves on a knot, or we can find ourselves giving up.
- [32 : 17] Sometimes we set ourselves an extraordinarily strict routine, and we feel hugely guilty if we fail to keep up with it. Other times we think, oh, well, I'm far too busy. I'm just not going to try, and God knows, and that's fine, and it doesn't really matter.
- These are two traps that we fall into, the trap of legalism that makes it this sort of thing that we must do, the trap of antinomianism that we think, oh, well, it doesn't really matter. God knows my heart, and it's all fine.
- Both of these things will arise. Both of these traps will grab us if we think of Bible reading just as another item on that to-do list.
- If we have all that list of priorities and then Bible reading, we'll either be a slave to it, like a legalist, or we'll just not even bother like the antinomian. We can often fall into that trap.
- All of that, I think, arises from a mindset that's misplaced. Because if we remember what Psalm 119 is teaching us, if we remember that God's Word is this incredible thing, and that it is the key to all the things that really matter in life, then we will find ourselves much better prepared for reading our Bibles.
- [33 : 38] We will forget about how many verses we've read, and instead we'll focus on the fact that this is God's Word and on the fact that we need it.

So how should you read the Bible? I'm not going to say anything about how much you should read or how often you should read it if you can every day, but above all that, I want you to have a different set of things on your mind when we think about how we're going to read it.

It comes back to what we just said about the why. If the Bible is God's means of educating us, how should you read it? You should read it ready to learn.

If the Bible is where we find direction, you should read it willing to be led. If the Bible is a means of being protected, you should read it prepared to be warned.

If the Bible is where we find support, then read it with a longing to be comforted. If the Bible gives us liberty, then read it seeking to be free.

[34 : 42] If the Bible is where we find certainty, then read it eager to be sure. If the Bible is going to give us happiness, then read it expecting to rejoice.

And if we're going to have a passion about it, then when you read it, please make sure that you really care about what it says.

I think that's how I need to start reading the Bible. And I think when we read the Bible like that, when we read the Bible like the man who wrote Psalm 119 read it, I think it will transform our lives.

And if you don't read the Bible much or have never read it, then give it a chance. Don't worry about time or quantity. Just focus on this stuff, the stuff that really matters.

How should we read the Bible? We should read it longing to hear God's voice and because it's what we desperately need.

[35 : 51] And the very last verse of the Psalm reinforces that beautifully because you have this great Psalm of 176 verses and 175 of them in many ways just speak about how amazing God's Word is.

And you think to yourself, well, you know this guy who wrote the Psalm, he's like a super Christian. He must have been really knowledgeable, really holy, really wise, really godly.

We think I'll never be like that. And yet you read the very last version, he says, I have gone astray like a lost sheep.

And all this amazing stuff in Psalm 119 was not written by a super Christian. It was written by someone who struggled and wondered and mucked up. But he loves God's Word because he knows that is what he needs.

And here's where we see the last amazing thing from Psalm 119. Remember I said that the word your runs right through Psalm 119.

[36 : 56] The focus is on your law, your statutes, your word. It's all focused on God. So if we ask the question about the Bible, who's is it?

The answer is that it's God's. And if we ask who's it for?

The answer is you. Let's pray.

Oh Lord, how much we love your law. And how we want to meditate on it day and night.

How we want your precepts and your statutes to be written on our hearts. Lord, we cling to your testimonies.

[37 : 54] We long for your rules. We place all our hope in your promises. Thank you for your word. Thank you for your Bibles. Amen.