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TRUTH  
& POWER

THE PLACE *of* SCRIPTURE *in the* CHRISTIAN LIFE

*New Edition*

Foreword by Kevin DeYoung



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defending their views, and what in the way of constructive discussion may lie beyond this preliminary entrenchment does not yet appear.

Because evangelicals today have watched so many lapse from thoroughgoing biblical faith, and because they see how much depends on whether the Bible can be trusted or not, and because so many vested interests, denominational and institutional, are involved in the discussion, feelings and fears often run high, and this could be dangerous in several ways. I focus now on just one of the dangers, that of so concentrating on the tactics of the battle as to forget the strategy of the campaign and the kind of victory that is needed.

When a battle is on, those involved tend to think exclusively of winning and to lose sight of the cause for which the battle is being fought. I recall the days when the Second World War was drawing to its end and Allied leaders began to say that, having won the war, our next and harder task was to win the peace. But not enough thought was given to winning the peace, and the record of events during the past fifty years shows that it was not won. In retrospect it almost looks as if we forgot what we had been fighting for. I am afraid that something similar might happen in the battle for the Bible. So I will now do what I can to ward off this danger, by asking you to raise your eyes above the battlefield and think about a series of strategic questions that pinpoint the significance of the debate for the theological and spiritual health of churches and Christians.

My questions were suggested to me by the psalmist's prayer "Give me understanding, that I may keep thy law and observe it with my whole heart" (Ps 119:34 RSV). I should like to dwell on these words a moment before we go further.

## WORD AND SPIRIT

How well do you know Psalm 119? Those who are wise come to know it very well, for they constantly seek to pray it. Why? Because it is a



model, giant-size (176 verses long, twice the length of any other psalm and ten to twenty times the length of most), of that on which the wise know their well-being depends—namely, attention to what God has said. The psalmist celebrates the gift of divine instruction as “a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (v. 105), without which he would be in the dark and unable to find his way. He hails God’s Word as the means whereby he comes to know, love and serve the God who gave it, and he admits that he would in every sense be lost without it. His prayer for understanding springs from this admission, for he recognizes that to understand God’s Word—which means to understand his own existence in the light of God’s Word—is to know the way of life. Lack of understanding of God’s Word is itself a state of death. The wise identify. They see that the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom starts with the understanding that God alone can give. So they follow the psalmist in cleaving to God’s Word and in asking its author to interpret it to them in its bearing on their lives.

As writing, the psalm dazzles. It divides into twenty-two sections, each marked by a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet and each consisting of eight verses starting with that letter. All but one of its 176 verses refer in some way to what the psalmist variously calls God’s “word,” “words,” “precepts,” “statutes,” “law,” “promise,” “testimonies” and “ordinances,” which spell out God’s “ways” and his “righteousness,” that is, his revealed will for people, and the fertility of thought with which changes are rung on the theme of response to what God has said is amazing. Psalm 119 is a very clever composition. Indeed, it is more than that. It is a transcript of 176 distinct moments of devotion to God, and as such it is awesomely poignant. One wonders how far this heroic combination of ardor and humility, resolution and dependence, trouble and triumph, distress at the ways of people and delight in the ways of God, was realized in the psalmist’s own life (for psalmists, like other poets, may perhaps verbalize beyond their experience). One



wonders if it has ever been fully realized except in the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Augustine's idea that the Psalms are essentially prayers of Jesus Christ is surely in place here. What this psalm shows us is the perfection of the perfect heart in its unwavering openness to all that God teaches in the Scriptures, and the Gospels show that our Master was mastered completely by what came to him from his Bible. So must we seek to be, for that is the way we are called to go. Jesus' disciples must be Scripture's pupils.

Psalm 119 is the Bible's own exposition, written in advance, of Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that all Scripture, being inspired by God, is profitable "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (RSV); and Paul's statement is the Bible's own summary of what this psalm is showing us.

"Give me understanding," prays the psalmist. Under many kinds of pressure and in a turmoil of emotions, he yet holds fast to the Word of the Lord and rests his hopes in the Lord of the Word. Distrusting himself and his own thoughts, however, he prays for understanding five times (vv. 34, 73, 125, 144, 169). He fears lest he should misconceive or misapply God's teaching, or narrow it unduly. He wants to comprehend its full range and thrust as it bears on his thoughts, purposes, attitudes, reactions, relationships, view of things and people, and he wants to comprehend it so that he may conform to it: "Give me understanding, *that I may keep thy law.*" Every day this should be your prayer, and mine too, for it is not enough for us to know the text of Scripture if we fail to understand it, so that we think we are living by it when we are not.

The New Testament identifies the ministry of interpretation and application for which the psalmist asks as the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is "the anointing which . . . teaches you about everything" (1 Jn 2:27 RSV), using as his means of instruction—his textbook, one might say—the contents of the Old and New Testaments.



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