Knowing God

The Point

Our hearts are satisfied as we encounter God through His Word.

The Passage

Psalm 119:17-24

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Many of us have become quite dependent on GPS. And why not? GPS calls out directions as we need them, never requiring us to take our eyes off the road. This becomes all the more important when we're in an unfamiliar area in hazardous conditions. One Canadian woman would disagree. She was in an unfamiliar area of Ontario on a "dark and stormy night," but when she drove down a boat launch into the Georgian Bay, she discovered her GPS may not have been as reliable as she thought. She did exactly as directed by her GPS, but the GPS was wrong. She came out of the frigid water just fine, but the same could not be said for her car.³

Thankfully, we can always rely on the direction the Bible gives without fail. It is always reliable and will never lead us astray. Psalm 119 is a comprehensive treatment of God's instruction, and in this psalm we see how the Bible produces spiritual growth, equips us to face opposition, and gives us a reliable perspective to navigate life.

The Setting

Psalm 119 is more than twice as long as any other psalm. It shares similarities with the Book of Proverbs, in that it contains many elements of wisdom sayings—including the vocabulary of wisdom sayings, the contrast between the righteous and the wicked, and an emphasis on the fear (reverence) of the Lord. Psalm 119 is probably most well-known for being an alphabetical acrostic. The psalm is divided into a series of eight-verse units, with each unit beginning with the successive letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

THE POINT

GET INTO THE STUDY



ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Use the Sketch Map option on page 115 of this Leader Guide to supplement **Question #1**.

DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 89 of the PSG: "When have bad directions or instructions really led you astray?" Allow time for each person to respond.

GUIDE: Direct group members to "The Bible Meets Life" on page 90 of the PSG. Introduce the importance of encountering God through His Word by reading or summarizing the text or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

GUIDE: Call attention to **"The Point"** on page 90 of the PSG: **"Our hearts are** satisfied as we encounter God through His Word."

PRAY: Transition into the study by asking God to help the group understand the importance of spending time with Him in His Word. Thank Him for the precious gift of the Bible.



STUDY THE BIBLE

PSALM 119:17-18

¹⁷ Deal generously with your servant so that I might live; then I will keep your word. ¹⁸ Open my eyes so that I may contemplate wondrous things from your instruction.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Psalm 119:17-18 on page 91 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Use the commentary for the verses on the next page of this Leader Guide to help explain the significance of God opening our eyes.

RECAP: Psalm 119 is an amazing piece of Hebrew poetry. The psalm has twentytwo sections—one section for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each section has eight lines that begin with the same letter. The psalmist quilted these sections together so the worshiper could reflect on the wisdom of submitting to the Lord's instruction.

Psalm 119:17-24 is the third section (called the Gimel section after the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet), and it radiates with passion for God's Word. The composer pleaded for God's favor so that he could "live" and "keep your word." The psalmist lived in order to obey God's Word. By repeating the concept with parallel words, the psalmist emphasized obedience. The goal was not merely to know or understand God's instruction; it was to live it, keep it, and obey it.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 91 of the PSG: **"When has God revealed Himself** to you in a fresh way through His Word?"

RECAP: Biblical interpretation is a science, and it can take work to interpret and expound on difficult passages, but that effort is not enough. Understanding God's Word is a spiritual work requiring the Holy Spirit to illuminate its meaning to the reader (1 Cor. 2:10-14). The psalmist longed to hear from God, but he prayerfully looked to God to open his eyes to what He revealed through His Word.

TRANSITION: We grow spiritually as we encounter God through His Word. In the next verses, we see that knowing God through His Word helps us face opposition.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What benefits have you experienced from studying God's Word?

PSALM 119:17-18 COMMENTARY

[VERSE 17] We grow spiritually as we encounter God through His Word. The 176 verses of Psalm 119 are arranged in twenty-two eight-verse sections, each beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse within each section begins with that same Hebrew letter. This would have been an aid in memorizing the psalm. The psalm's overall theme is delighting in the Word of God. The first section (Ps. 119:1-8) is similar to Psalm 1, in that both emphasize the individual who follows God's Word (instruction) will be blessed (happy). In the second section of the psalm (vv. 9-16), the psalmist emphasized his desire to live a life of purity before God by following and delighting in God's Word.

The third (vv. 17-24) and fourth (vv. 25-32) sections of the psalm are more autobiographical in nature than the first two sections. The psalmist provided a glimpse into the persecution he had suffered in his stand for God and God's Word. Verses 17-18 served as a prayer for the psalmist. The opening words of both verses present the psalmist's requests to God. The writer had confidence that God is there, God wants to help us, and God has the power to help us. The writer's request that God **deal generously with** him translates a Hebrew term (*gamal*) which has the meaning of dealing well with or rewarding a person. The psalmist's prayer suggests that he expected God to relate to him not with judgment, but with mercy and goodness.

Note how the writer described his relationship with God. He was God's **servant**. The Hebrew and Greek terms translated as *servant* in the Old and New Testaments are often used for (God's) people in their relationship with God. The psalmist's use of the term *servant* implied that he had been faithful to God in his actions.

The psalmist prayed God would deal generously with him so that he might **live** and **keep** God's Word. The text does not indicate in what sense the psalmist was using the term *live*. Although some commentators believe the term is referencing the psalmist's physical life, others understand the term to be referring to eternal life—both in quality (life as it is meant to be) and quantity (living forever). Whichever type of life the psalmist referenced, his request for life had a singular purpose: his desire to *keep* God's Word.

[VERSE 18] The psalmist's second prayer request was that God would open his eyes. In Scripture, the image of opening a person's eyes was used metaphorically for gaining insight and seeing with clarity, for understanding the truth. The psalmist's request that God would open his eyes was a spiritual plea to God that He grant the psalmist understanding of God, His Word, and His ways. This request brings to mind the words of Jesus concerning the Pharisees' "blindness" to God and His ways, especially in their failure to recognize Jesus for who He is-the Son of God and God's promised Messiah. In regard to the Pharisee's taking offense at His words, Jesus replied, "Leave them alone! They are blind guides. And if the blind guide the blind, both will fall into a pit" (Matt. 15:14). Another event that reflects the imagery of the psalmist's plea to God that He open his eyes is the encounter the two disciples on the road to Emmaus had with the risen Jesus when He opened the Scriptures to them (Luke 24:31-32).

The psalmist then identified the desire behind his request—that he might **contemplate wondrous things** from God's **instruction.** The Hebrew term (*navat*) translated *contemplate* is used three times in this psalm (Ps. 119:6,15,18). Generally, the term means to think intently; when used in a spiritual sense, it means to meditate on. *Wondrous things* refers to God's self-revelation of His character (who He is) and the spiritual life that flows out of a relationship with Him. These wondrous things are the very decrees which God has declared, His Word (v. 129). God has revealed Himself and what He expects from us—how we should live—in His Word.

STUDY THE BIBLE

PSALM 119:19-22

¹⁹ I am a resident alien on earth; do not hide your commands from me. ²⁰ I am continually overcome with longing for your judgments. ²¹ You rebuke the arrogant, the ones under a curse, who wander from your commands. ²² Take insult and contempt away from me, for I have kept your decrees.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Psalm 119:19-22 on page 92 of the PSG.

RECAP: Hearing from God was important to the psalmist, especially since he knew that the world around him was not always a friendly place. After marinating his soul in the instruction of the Lord, the psalmist saw the sin-saturated world as foreign to him. He declared that he was "a resident alien on earth," a sojourner who felt like he did not belong; he was an outsider.

GUIDE: Use the commentary for the verses on the next page of this Leader Guide to help explain.

DO: Direct group members to **Engage** with "Life Support" on page 93 of the PSG (page 115 in this Leader Guide) to help them consider how God's Word offers support to their lives.

SUMMARIZE: The psalmist had a quiet confidence that God would straighten everything out. Though others treated him with contempt and pummeled him with insults, he knew this was a temporary condition. He knew he was keeping God's commands and decrees, and that was what really mattered. What mattered most was not what the cultural elite thought of him, but what God thought of him— God's judgment. And he knew God was pleased with the life choices he was making—the choices to know and obey God's commandments.

Living God's way is not usually the easiest path, but it is always the best path. It requires that believers go against the grain of the sin-filled culture that surrounds us, which often means we will endure insults. Other times it means we will face outright persecution, but we can withstand all these things as we trust God and live in obedience to His Word.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

When have you felt like an outsider in this world? **DISCUSS: Question #3** on page 94 of the PSG: **"How has knowing God through His Word helped you face challenges in life?"**

TRANSITION: In the next verses, we see that knowing God through His Word helps us have His perspective.

PSALM 119:19-22 COMMENTARY

[VERSE 19] Knowing God through His Word helps us face opposition. Verses 19-22 reveal that once Scripture is understood, it then must be put to work through doing—personal obedience. The psalmist noted that he was **a resident alien on earth.** This phrase refers to someone living in a society other than his own. We know that the psalmist was a native Israelite. In one sense, the Israelites were sojourners in the promised land. All the earth belongs to God. It is His and His alone (Lev. 25:23). In another sense, God's people of every time period are sojourners in the world, meaning the world system made up of everyone and everything that opposes God, His Word, and His ways (1 John 2:15-17).

The psalmist was suffering persecution for his love of and loyalty to God and His Word (see Ps. 119:21-24). In response to his situation, the psalmist sought God's **commands.** The psalmist recognized that alone he could not deal with the realities of life he was facing. Furthermore, he knew that true safety and security were to be found in his relationship with God and in obedience to God's commandments. In the face of what he was experiencing, the psalmist's greatest concern was the possibility that God might **hide** His commands from him. The psalmist recognized the centrality of God and His Word to his life.

[VERSE 20] The psalmist presented the substance of his pleas of the three previous verses as a statement of fact. He was **continually overcome** with longing for God's Word (**your judgments**). The Hebrew term (*garas*) translated *overcome* communicates the deep longing the psalmist had for God's Word.

[VERSE 21] Verses 21-22 point to the psalmist's experience. The psalmist stated a truth: God rebukes the **arrogant.** To **rebuke** means to censure severely, to reprimand and reprove. In Scripture, when used in relation to God, the Hebrew term (*gaar*) translated *rebuke* is often used in reference to God's judgments against the nations (Ps. 9:5; Isa. 17:13) and His commands toward nature (Ps. 106:9; Mal. 3:11).

The Bible repeatedly speaks of God's displeasure with the arrogant. After God rescued David from King Saul, David expressed his gratitude to God in praise. In that praise, David acknowledged, "You rescue an oppressed people, but your eyes are set against the proud—you humble them" (2 Sam. 22:28). The Book of Proverbs speaks of God's attitude toward the proud and the certainty of God's judgment against them (Prov. 16:5). The arrogant are those who are under a curse, who wander from God's commands. Why are they cursed? To help answer that question, we should ask the opposite question: "Who are those who are blessed?" The opening verses of Psalm 119 provide the answer. They "are those whose way is blameless, who walk according to the LORD's instruction" (Ps. 119:1). They "are those who keep his decrees and seek him with all their heart" (v. 2). So, the ones under God's curse are those who don't live blamelessly, who don't live according to God's instruction, who don't keep His decrees, and who don't seek God with all their hearts.

[VERSE 22] Apparently evil people had insulted him and treated the psalmist with contempt. The psalmist asked God to remove **insult** and **contempt** from him. To *insult* a person means to slur him, to abuse him, and to disgrace him (attack his dignity). The strength of the Hebrew term (*cherpah*) is found in the definition: to revile or shame. The opposite of such behavior is to praise a person. To treat people with *contempt* means to disrespect them, to dislike or despise them, and to be condescending toward them.

The psalmist provided God with the reason for his request: he had kept God's **decrees.** Notice that the opposition to the psalmist came from those who had wandered away from God's Word (v. 21). Christians today face a very similar situation to that of the psalmist. Those who follow God and obey His Word are often not well received by our society, which tends to revel in what is wrong and mock those who do and stand up for what is right.

111

STUDY THE BIBLE



PSALM 119:23-24

²³ Though princes sit together speaking against me, your servant will think about your statutes; ²⁴ your decrees are my delight and my counselors.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Psalm 119:23-24 on page 94 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Use the commentary for the verses on the next page of this Leader Guide to help explain how God's decrees delight and act as counselors.

RECAP: The psalmist didn't merely face the insults or contempt of everyday people; he experienced a conspiracy of princes and governmental officials who collaborated to persecute him. As always, God's Word, the delight of his life and constant counselor, gave him the proper perspective to face the persecution.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 94 of the PSG: "When has your perspective on something been changed because of God's Word?"

RECAP: Meditating on God's Word requires focused, deliberate attention over a prolonged period of time on biblical teachings. Bible reading gives breadth. Bible study gives depth. Meditating on the Word gives perspective. It's an intentional choice we make to join God in His work of transforming us into the image of Christ. Spending quality time in God's Word changes the way we think and respond to life.

When we meditate on God's Word, it becomes the delight of our lives, the constant counselor that guides our decisions. The Bible is worthy of our time. It provides proper guidance for life and equips us to make wise choices under pressure and even persecution.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 95 of the PSG: "What challenges do we face in bringing God's perspective to bear in our lives?"

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Use the Pairing Up option on page 115 of this Leader Guide to allow group members to consider how we get to know someone on a personal level. Compare that with how we get to know God better.

GUIDE: Refer back to "The Point" for this session: **"Our hearts are satisfied as we encounter God through His Word."**

ALTERNATE QUESTION: Whom do you know who really leans into God's Word and utilizes it in their lives?

PSALM 119:23-24 COMMENTARY

[VERSE 23] We want God's perspective, and knowing Him through His Word helps us to have His perspective. Verses 23-24 continue the themes from the previous verses of this stanza: the persecution the psalmist experienced because of his faithfulness to God's Word and the delight the psalmist had in following God's Word. These two verses add more detail about the psalmist's personal situation. Previously, the psalmist had identified the sources of persecution as the arrogant (v. 21) and those who insulted him and treated him with contempt (v. 22). Here he identified a third source of persecution as coming from government officials-princes. The Hebrew term (sar) translated princes encompasses officials or leaders in military, religious, and governmental spheres. This is an appropriate reminder that persecution can come from a variety of different sources. There will be people around you who follow the wisdom of the world instead of God's Word. However, it doesn't matter who may be against you; your call is to remain in fellowship with God through Christ and to continually meditate on and follow the Word of God. Furthermore, persecution from such individuals is nothing new for God's people. The writer of the Book of Hebrews provided an excellent summary of the long history of those faithful to God and His Word who suffered persecution at the hands of those who stood in opposition to God, His Word, and His people (Heb. 11).

The response of the psalmist to the officials who persecuted him was that he thought about God's **statutes.** Once again, the psalmist saw himself in the proper position, as God's **servant.** From that position, he stated his actions: he would **think about** or meditate on God's Word. When faced with danger, the psalmist looked to God and His Word for his security. Taking refuge in God's Word was a repeated action on the part of the psalmist, not merely a one-time event. Instead of responding directly to the officials who were persecuting him, the psalmist chose to respond by taking refuge in God's Word. By turning to God's Word in the face of persecution, the psalmist refocused on God's perspective.

When we face persecution (or any bad experience for that matter) we have two choices. We can turn to God in faith or move away from Him in hurt, anger, doubt, fear, and so forth. When the psalmist faced persecution for being faithful to God and His Word, he chose to cling even tighter to God, the Source of his strength and life. May we always be so close to God that we choose to respond to persecution by turning to Him and His Word!

[VERSE 24] In focusing on God and His Word, the psalmist did not deny the reality of his situation, but neither did he dwell on it. Instead, he focused on God's **decrees.** The psalmist made two statements about God's decrees. The emotional response of the psalmist reflected his spiritual maturity. God's decrees were his delight. The psalmist loved God and His Word. In doing so, he reflected the attitude God desires for every person. When Jesus was asked what was the greatest command of God's law, He replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands" (Matt. 22:37-40). When a person centers his life on God and His Word, all aspects of his life are effected for the good.

Not only were God's decrees the psalmist's delight they were also his **counselors.** With God's Word at the center of his life, God's guidance and advice were available to the psalmist to guide him in all the situations he encountered. While it is very important to listen to godly people whom the Lord puts into our lives who we trust and who know us well, be that family and/or friends, they cannot replace God's Word. God's Word is the only perfect, infallible source of guidance.

LIVE IT OUT

5 MINUTES

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 96 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the following applications:

- Read the Bible. If you're not spending time in God's Word, start here and now. Spend at least fifteen minutes every day reading God's Word.
- Study the Bible. Choose a book of the Bible and spend time studying its message. Your pastor or group leader can recommend a commentary or study helps to assist you in your study.
- Meditate on God's Word. Turn off the TV, computer, and smartphone and spend uninterrupted time meditating on God's Word. Journal your thoughts and observations.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the final paragraph from page 96 of the PSG.

Unlike the sometimes unreliable GPS, the Bible is always reliable. It will provide the direction, guidance, and perspective you need to navigate this sin-filled world.

LEADER PACK: In advance, make copies of **Pack Item 11**, the "5 Ways to Get into God's Word" handout, and distribute them to your group members. Invite group members to consider each of the five habits listed, evaluate their own practices, and record next steps in any areas they would like to strengthen.

PRAY: Ask God to give us a deeper passion to know Him through His Word. Thank Him for speaking into our lives and empowering us to live out His truth.



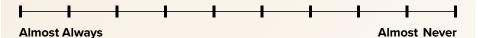
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ENGAGE

Life Support. Consider the following statement and place a mark on the scale below.

When faced with opposition to my faith, I boldly stand firm.



What encouragement from this session supports you when faced with opposition or rejection?

BONUS CONTENT



ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): In advance, bring sheets of paper and pens. Ask each group member to pick up one of each as they enter. Instruct them to sketch out a map from the church to a common (but unnamed) place that most members would know. Then ask them to exchange cards with another member and see if they can guess the location correctly.

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Ask members to pair up with another member. They should enlist someone they don't know well. Give the groups five minutes to share something about themselves that others may not know. Next, ask members to share what they learned with the class. Make the point that communication was necessary for members to get to know each other better. Relate this experience to getting to know God better by spending time with Him through the Scripture.