

## **Living with a GPS: Orienting our lives with a God Positioning System**

### **Oriented Towards and With the Word**

*Psalm 119:1-8*

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#### **Series Introduction:**

I am going to begin this with a confession. I am old. At least I am old fashioned. Because of that, I like maps. I have always liked maps. I look for and at maps at antique shops. I have a wall sized street map of the city of Dayton from sometime in the 50's. I like maps collected in books, called atlases. I like maps on walls. I like maps that were stored together in racks that pulled down from the wall over the chalkboards at school. I like maps that you used to travel with, that folded out and could never be folded back correctly again.

But today we use...a GPS. It is a handy concept. It is not exactly like a map though. Some would say it is better, sometimes I don't think so. By using satellite and computer technology it now, for all practical purposes, has replaced the use of those awkward maps for travel. A GPS helps us to orient our travel. We can know exactly where we are. We can have a map of the roads and terrain around us although it is often difficult to navigate the picture to see much beyond where you are. We can have directions for our trip.

All of us have a life GPS. Something or someone is always orienting us to who we are, where we are and where we are going. We are beginning a new Sunday evening series entitled "Living with a GPS: Orienting our lives with a God Positioning System." The purpose of this series is to help us move through the different areas of our lives, similar to the terrain, roads, on a trip, oriented towards God. While our GPS device is here on earth on our phones, in our cars. It is actually getting its signal from the heavens, from satellites. We as Christians are also supposed to have a heavenward, God-ward orientation. This is what it means to live a godly life. It is not primarily about holiness, a state of being. Rather it is primarily about living, an action, with a God Positioning System.

Christians need to learn to live with a God Positioning System. That is, they need to live a life oriented to and by God so as to be able to have a proper goal and direction. We will be directed by Biblical texts that speak of godliness. In this series we will be asking, basically, what is guiding, controlling and defining our lives, area by area? Will it be God? Will we live a godly life or a worldly life? Who will define, direct and determine our goals and actions? This series will lay the groundwork to help people think through issues of life from God's point of view.

## Sermon introduction;

This opening sermon in the series is entitled, "Oriented Towards and With the Word." In that title I am struggling to get across the two-pronged idea of a God Positioning System. It is both directing us to God and is coming from or by God. In essence God is our guide to him.

For the beginning of this series I was assigned the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm. This is likely because of the well-known passage that involves a similar, less contemporary metaphor found in verse 105:

*Your word is a lamp to my feet  
and a light to my path.*

The ideas of feet and path imply a journey, often a Biblical metaphor for life. Remember, a metaphor is the use of a common or familiar concept or thing to explain something more complex. "Hard as a rock" is a version of this. My wife will tell you she is very familiar with this metaphor because my head is "hard as a rock." Now she is not concerned with the particular structure and firmness with my skull, it implies that I am stubborn, self-centered and difficult to change. By saying my "head is hard as a rock", we more vividly see and understand my problem. So in this verse we see the metaphors of feet and path coupled with that of lamps and light. These are ideas of clarity and illumination. The metaphor then leads us to something that provides clarity and direction for living.

However, we are going to focus on the first eight verses of this psalm for this presentation. It is quite likely that the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm is a companion to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Psalms as well as the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm. Each of these are encouraging a life immersed in God's law. To highlight this relationship, the first word of the 1<sup>st</sup> Psalm is the same as the first in the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Psalm we read:

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

This passage, which opens the book of psalms, also known as the Psalter, opens two psalms that are closely linked. They link companion ideas of "law" with "king". Both are central concepts in the earlier sections of Torah and Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. In this opening statement we are reminded that "blessing" comes with the law of teaching of God and through meditating and applying it to orient ones life by and in it. There are several ways for us to think about the word "law." The "law" is more that a set of rules and regulations, it can also be translated instruction or teaching. The rules component of law is a way of teaching us about God and his character. Since the cross, we are not under the

law as a covenant document but we are to understand how the “law” teaches us. Genesis is in the section of the Hebrew Bible called Torah or “The Law” and it is primarily narrative. Something about these stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph are “law”. We should also notice the narrative settings that are less prominent but still present as we move through the rest of the books of the law as well. As we listen to “the law”, don’t limit your understanding of this word to rules but to teaching and guidance as well.

Also linked to the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm is the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm. It uses some to the same vocabulary that is expanded in the later psalm. To keep these three texts together in your mind, it is 1 and 19 and 119. Verses 7 and 8 of the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm say this:

*The law of the Lord is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the Lord is sure,  
making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the Lord are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is pure,  
enlightening the eyes;*

Now the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm is an acrostic poem. An acrostic uses the letters of a word, name or idea to expand the thought. Companies use this technique with their names as part of their logo or promotion. This acrostic is an alphabet acrostic that involves 22 stanzas of 8 verses, each verse beginning with the same letter of the alphabet (the Hebrew alphabet so, aleph, beth, gimel etc.) The use of this technique is a vehicle to suggest completeness or fullness. It is in essence saying “this is everything about God’s teaching from A to Z.” One commentator put it this way: “...The entire alphabet, the source of all words, is marshaled to the praise of God. One cannot actually use all of the words in a language, but by using the alphabet, one uses all potential words.”

Each stanza also uses eight principle words for God’s law/instruction with a few minor exceptions. Many of the same words found in the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm. Not every stanza uses all eight, many use one more than once and there are an occasional irregular substitutions, but in general, each verse uses one of these words. These may differ from translation to translation but are: law, testimonies, precept, statutes, commandments, rules, ways, and promise. This expanded vocabulary should be used to try to distinguish subtle nuances but to recognize the various ways of thinking about this idea. By using all of these words we have before us another way to give the reader a sense of completeness.

So we can extend this idea of law as instruction and use it to include God’s instruction in all of Scripture, prophetic writing, other narrative materials and wisdom. Combine this with the NT expression of gospel and epistle, we should

read this psalm “Christianly” by hearing each word about instruction as reverberating as “Scripture.”

This entire psalm then speaks of the completeness of life as lived under and by God’s instruction and plan. So as we read this first unit, we are being introduced to a life of “instruction” from God. What does this unit say about our position/standing and response to this instruction? It in essence gives an understanding of the role that God’s word, his instruction, his system, plays in orienting our lives to and for him. It is for him that we live and it is by him that we live. This psalm is a great defense for the role of Scripture in our GPS, our God Positioning System.

### Exposition: Psalm 119:1-8

Notice, I want to suggest one way to read this psalm is to ask three questions of each stanza. The first is “What does it say God will do or has done because of the ‘law’?” The second is “What should we be doing with the ‘law’?” And the third is “What does this then look like in life, our living and in relationships both with God and others?”

Let us then read the first eight verses of this psalm.

*Blessed are those whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the Lord!*

*Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,  
who seek him with their whole heart,*

*who also do no wrong,  
but walk in his ways!*

*You have commanded your precepts  
to be kept diligently.*

*Oh that my ways may be steadfast  
in keeping your statutes!*

*Then I shall not be put to shame,  
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.*

*I will praise you with an upright heart,  
when I learn your righteous rules.*

*I will keep your statutes;  
do not utterly forsake me!*

So to answer our three questions, it says that God has and will “bless” those who walk this way. It goes on to say that God not allow those same people to be put to shame if they live in this manner. And it presents a plea for God not to forsake, a plea that implies that he will not.

What, then, should we be doing? Besides the obvious “walk”, meaning live by, we see a number of words that intensify and add emphasis to this idea. We keep, seek with whole heart, kept diligently, eyes fixed, praise and learn, keep.

And then this exhibits itself as a life that looks like one that is blameless, who does no wrong, and has an upright or righteous heart.

On your own, use this format to read each stanza and feel the completeness and comprehensiveness of its lesson. You will see that the intended structure of the poem reinforces its theological content. In short, “law or torah”, God’s revelatory instruction, is pervasive and all encompassing. Law has become for the psalmist much more than the rules by which Israel should live, as given in the Pentateuch; “law or torah” has become a personal way to God. In fact it appears that the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm gives “law-torah” virtually the status of a divine person, much like wisdom in Proverbs 8. In this psalm, the instruction of God is not presented as a strict set of rules and regulation, but a way of life or approach to being that brings one close to God.

Let us bring these ideas into the New Testament. There are a number of ways we can do this but for tonight let us think about the apostle John’s record of Jesus’ own words with this in mind. Jesus made several statements pertinent to this theme. These are just a few. First from John chapter 14 in verse six he says:

*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

Jesus claims that he himself is the way to the father. In fact he is the only way. Using our GPS metaphor, he is the only true and safe direction to the destination that is God. But earlier he had declared in chapter 8 verse 12:

*“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”*

He is the personal light for this path. Could he be asserting that he is both Torah and Wisdom? And he built upon that theme, using some of our 119<sup>th</sup> language as well in chapter 12. First from verses 35 and 36 we read:

*“The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”*

We have intensified the idea by not only “having” a light but “believing” that light. Then in verses 44-50:

*“Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. <sup>45</sup> And whoever sees me sees him who sent me. <sup>46</sup> I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. <sup>47</sup> If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.*

Notice the idea of hearing and keeping words that are light. These are consistent with what we have read in 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm.

*<sup>48</sup> The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. <sup>49</sup> For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. <sup>50</sup> And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.”*

Jesus goes on then to use the word “commandment” that leads to or is in itself a life that is eternal, heavenly, God-ward. Jesus has reinforced our concern that this is a both/and idea with respect to God. He is both the source of our guidance and direction as well as the goal or aim of our journey. At the heart of God’s involvement in giving us the Scriptures, in all of its facets, is the centrality of its witness to Jesus Christ—his person, works and words.

Reflect and respond:

Do we have an orientation in our lives that looks like this?

We need to care to look toward God, and seek Him his way by his word. He will direct us and his guidance is perfect. We will often be confused but we are to fear God and keep his commandments. We often think we can figure out where to go or what to do on our own or maybe with a little help. We have all seen the bumper sticker that says, “God is my copilot.” But it is God himself who ensures he will be known. He does not leave us in the dark about his character, his purposes or his promises. So you may have seen the follow on bumper sticker that says, “If God is your copilot, move over.”

The fact that we have a Bible is more sure than any experience or intuition we may have. That is part of the thrust of Peter’s first letter. The origin of the Scriptures can and to some extent must be explained as the activity of figures such as Moses, David, Isaiah and the apostle Paul. The human authorship of each part of the Bible is never simply incidental. Yet to explain the origin of the Bible in human terms alone is deeply inadequate. The Bible as a whole and each part has its ultimate origin in the communicative activity of God.

In reading and interpreting our Bibles and we must hear God's voice in those human words. Not because God has merely accommodated to use our frailty but that he has always intended this to be how we understand him and his ways. God is himself the source of human language. He was the first speaker and invested language with a deep significance for personal relationships. Far from being an unsuitable or inadequate vehicle for God's revelation of himself, the first use of human language had precisely this function. So in this we can confidently know that God makes promises that can be trusted. It is God's intention that his people trust these promises. The rich variety in form, genre, style, literary and rhetorical devices of the Scriptures is part of the wonder of the divine gift. Precisely for this reason, a plain reading of the Bible should never be confused with a uniformly flat or "literal" reading of the Bible. There is a dynamic quality to human language generally that is reflected a various levels in the Biblical text.

And finally our faithful reading of the Word is done in the context of faith and discipleship, an essential component of which is other-centered service. Churches are by God's design the arena for such faith and service. They then are also the vehicle for teaching and hearing the Scriptures. Now, the role of the churches consists not in determining the meaning of Scripture but in facilitating the recognition and embrace of that meaning. We do not and should not read alone. We read together; not just along side each other, but to and with each other.

In times like these we need to continue to be focused on a Scripture driven, God directed, God Positioning System.

