

BIBLE DELIGHT:

*Heartbeat
of the
Word of God*

For the busy, sometime burdened, Christian worker, ever giving out, here is proper nourishment for the soul. I suggest a section a day! For me it is marvellously real and refreshing.

Dick Lucas

It has been wisely said that the Psalter is a spiritual cardiograph. The more I am at home in the Psalms, the healthier my spiritual condition. This is especially true of Psalm 119. The way we are to delight in the Lord and feed on Him, is to delight in, and feed on His Word. The heart-beat of spiritual contentment is to cry with the Psalmist – ‘Oh, how I love your law’. It is always a wonderful tonic when a fairly familiar passage of the Bible is faithfully taught and explained with fresh understanding and application. Christopher Ash opens up Psalm 119 so that heart, mind and will are touched with the result, which he intends, that we can understand it, feel it and sing it. I simply loved *Bible Delight* and it will enrich Quiet Times much more than the 22 days suggested.

Jonathan Fletcher
Emmanuel Church, Wimbledon, London

BIBLE DELIGHT:

*Heartbeat
of the
Word of God*

*Psalm 119 for the Bible teacher
and Bible hearer*

Christopher Ash

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Note on Translation

The translation used in this book is similar to other reasonably close versions such as the NRSV and the ESV, but with two important differences. First, I have tried so far as I can to be consistent in translating the main Hebrew words by the same English word. Second, I have attempted (sometimes at the expense of elegance) to show as many as possible of the structural and stylistic features of the poem, for example when verses begin or end with the same word.

In some verses, as elsewhere in the Psalms, we are not sure what English tense best translates the Hebrew. This is a notoriously difficult issue in translating Hebrew poetry, and I am not competent to adjudicate; I have generally followed the NRSV or ESV.

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Dedication

To John and Katie, Andy, Barnaby and Lizzie

Series Preface

This is the first in a series of books which looks at the culture and context of preaching and teaching God's Word. We need help not just in 'how to preach Bible books', but clarity on the point and purpose of preaching and teaching. The books in this series will be short and accessible, ideal for personal use, group study or for training. The following titles are planned:

Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God

The Practical Preacher (revised and updated)

Preaching that Builds the Church

Training Preachers: What it takes to make a preacher

The Lifelong Preacher: Keeping fresh, keeping focused

Christopher Ash's book, *Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God* is an excellent foundation for the series. It gets us to the heart of our motivation to read, preach and teach. In his own words: 'we preach out of Bible delight in our own hearts and for Bible delight in our hearers' souls.' Christopher's Bible material is Psalm 119 – the great psalm of Bible delight!

The introductory chapter focuses our minds on the essence of Bible delight. The 'meat of the book' then works systematically through the text of Psalm 119, taking each of the twenty-two sections in turn. Additional material ('Getting our Bearings in Psalm 119') is included in the chapters dealing with the first two sections. Personal response questions are included at the end of each chapter.

While the primary purpose of the book is to stimulate Bible delight in teachers and hearers of God's Word, the book would be an ideal guide to tackling a preaching or teaching series on Psalm 119.

David Jackman and Robin Sydserrff
Series Editors, London, March 2008

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to those who have given me opportunities to preach this wonderful psalm, first at the Evangelical Ministry Assembly and the St.Helen's City Partnership Summer School in 2006, and subsequently at the Cornhill Training Course and in various churches. My thanks also to my colleagues at The Proclamation Trust both for their encouragement and for their own modelling of Bible delight in their lives and ministries. These thanks are especially due to Robin Sydserff and David Jackman, the Series Editors, and to Zoë Moore for her painstaking proof reading and editorial work.

Christopher Ash
March 2008

Introduction

The Essence of Bible Delight

Oh, how I love your instruction!
All the day it is my meditation.
(Ps. 119:97)

The purpose of this book is to stimulate Bible delight among Bible teachers and Bible hearers. Specifically, my aim is to persuade those of us who teach and preach the Bible that we can only do so faithfully when we ourselves are thrilled with what we teach, and further that our aim ought to be to stimulate the same delight in our hearers. That is to say, we preach out of Bible delight in our own hearts and for Bible delight in our hearers' souls. To put it negatively, if we preach out of what Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to call 'ossified orthodoxy', then we will breed that same ossified orthodoxy in our hearers.

If someone asks you or me, 'Do you love the Bible?' we might reply - if we are Christians - 'Well, I know that I ought to love it. But to be honest I am not sure that I do. My Bible reading is more a matter of duty than delight. I wish it were a delight, but all too often it is a chore.' If so, Psalm 119 is for you. If you are not a Christian believer, that may sound a stupid question. 'Of course not,' you may respond. Perhaps you love the Bible as literature. But I am not talking about loving the Bible as literature. I am talking about loving the Bible for its

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substance. If you want to know why Christians love the Bible, you cannot do better than to start with Psalm 119.

It is especially for you if, like me, you have a high view of the Bible. We are persuaded that the Bible is trustworthy. We believe it is the word of God himself. Perhaps we are happy to speak of it as 'inspired', even 'infallible' or 'inerrant'. And yet even for us, until and unless we love the Bible and find it a delight, our view of the Bible is too low. There are hints in the psalm that the singer was what we would call a Bible teacher. For example, in verse 79 he prays that 'those who fear' God will 'turn' to him in order to 'know your testimonies'. It is unsurprising that one who could compose this remarkable psalm would be employed in teaching the word of God. If so, it is a challenging example of the heart of Bible delight that ought to beat in our own Bible teaching.

On the common where we used to walk our dog there is a golf course. Beside one fairway we came across one of those benches donated in memory of someone. I forget the name of this man, so let us call him Fred. The bench simply read, 'To Fred, who loved his golf.' I was a little sad that this was the best they could think to say about Fred. But presumably he did love his golf. And I imagine they knew he loved his golf because he played it so much. What he played showed what he loved. His sport was his delight.

If I were to ask you, 'Do you play with your Bible?' you might be surprised, even offended. 'No,' you might say, 'the Bible is much too serious to play with.' But there is another way of looking at it. As the legendary Liverpool football manager Bill Shankly famously said, 'Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I'm very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.' And, joking apart, what we play may not be trivial at all. After all, they knew that Isaac was married to Rebekah because he was seen playing or sporting with her in a way that only made sense if she was his delight (Gen. 26:8, 9).

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As we read and pray through Psalm 119 we keep company with one who delighted in his Bible. Bible delight is the heartbeat of this psalm. We might even say that he plays with Bible words, as he turns from one word to another in an elaborate poetic playfulness. More than twenty-five times he says he delights in the word of God, or loves and longs for the word of God. To him it is delicious (v. 103) and delightful. As he reads it he keeps stumbling across treasure (v. 162). It is his hope, his peace, his joy, his song, his freedom and his comfort.

He had much less of the Bible than we do. Certainly he had no New Testament. Probably he didn't have all our Old Testament. We don't know who wrote the psalm, or when. But he loved his shorter Bible. From his psalm we may learn the logic and the dynamics of Bible delight. I pray that as we learn to sing his psalm, we too may learn to love our complete and even richer Bibles, and that our hearts will beat in time with his, the heartbeat of Bible delight.

CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE AND THE PSALMS

Before we launch in to Psalm 119, let us take a step back from Bible delight to think about Christian experience more generally. What does it *feel* like to be a believer? When someone asks, 'How are you?' what do you say? Most of us reply, if we are below a certain age, 'I'm good, thanks' (although as a cultural dinosaur I think it would be more correct to say, 'I'm well, thanks!'). But sometimes I feel like the girl in a recent mobile 'phone advertisement. She is on her mobile, and a friend asks, 'How are things with Mike?' Her face crumples and she replies, 'How long have you got?' (and how glad she is of her free minutes). 'How are you?' 'How long have you got?' In any group of Christians, that kind of honesty would unlock a flood of Christian experience told as it actually is, and not as we would like to pretend it is.

What does the Christian life feel like? What ought it to feel like? What is authentic Christian experience? This question

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is important for assurance, lest we worry that our experience shows we are not Christian at all. It is important for our expectations, so that we do not give up when the going gets tough. It is important for evangelism, so that we tell people honestly the life into which we invite them. It is important for stability, otherwise we are always worrying that we are missing out, that if only we read this book, or went on that course, or attended the other conference, or somehow got ourselves to where the latest wind of doctrine was blowing, well, then we would feel alright at last. So it is an important question: what does the Christian life feel like?

One of the great functions of the Psalms is to shape our ragged emotions and desires, so that we not only think as we ought to think, but also feel as we ought to feel and long as we ought to long. If we are familiar with the doctrine of Total Depravity we will know that this important doctrine does not teach that we are all as bad as we could possibly be; that would be absurd and make it impossible to account for self-sacrifice, virtue, honesty, kindness, and goodness in all sorts of people. The doctrine of Total Depravity means that every part and facet of our human personhood is touched and tainted by sin, including our desires and feelings. When we moved into one house my wife bought two wooden flower tubs. They had been made by sawing an old whisky barrel in two. She asked me to drill drainage holes in them. And as I bored into the wood with my bit and brace, there was an unmistakable whiff of whisky. The whisky had seeped into every fibre of the wood. Wherever you drilled, you would find it. In the same way human sin has seeped into every fibre of human personhood. Our minds, our hearts, our feelings, our bodies, our desires, all alike are impregnated with sin. And this includes our feelings: we do not feel as we ought to feel. Sometimes we are happy at others' misfortune, or sad at their success. We do not want what we ought to want; our loves are disordered. We love what we ought to hate, and we shun what we ought to desire.

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The Psalms give us authorised, authentic response to God and his word. We learn in them not only what he has said to us (the word of God coming down); we learn also how we may and ought to respond (the word of God going back up). The Psalms are therefore of great practical importance in the Christian life, and a vital protection against imbalance. In past ages, those who called themselves 'evangelical' were derided as 'enthusiasts' (e.g. by Mgr. Ronald Knox in his famous book *Enthusiasm*); we were thought to be too emotional at the expense of the intellect. Now it is the reverse. Since the advent of the charismatic movement in the 1960's some of us may look askance at some of the excesses of that movement. We want to say to our charismatic friends (in love!), 'You are too focused on experience, and therefore you are not stable, you follow every new fad, you are not breeding maturity, you are characterized by superficiality.' But in response they may say to us (also in love!), 'We may be too focused on experience. But to listen to some of you preach and speak, it does not seem to us that you have any emotions at all, or any real experience of the living God!'

Too often this conversation is a dialogue of the deaf. I want to suggest that a thoughtful, sensitive, and theological restoration of the Psalms into Christian prayer and praise may provide God's way forward. For the Psalms perfectly combine thought and feeling, theology and prayer, emotion and reality, the subjective and the objective. In particular, Psalm 119 can inject into the heartbeat of Christian experience the passionate and reasonable delight in the written word of God.

LEARNING TO SING THIS PSALM (HOW TO USE THIS BOOK)

I have been challenged by this description of one seventeenth-century minister who preached 190 sermons on Psalm 119. A contemporary wrote that he 'writes like one that knew the singer's heart, and felt in his own the sanctifying power of what he wrote.' His sermons began with the understanding,

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dealt with the affections, but drove purposefully towards the promotion of practical holiness. ‘They come to the conscience; first presenting us a mirror, in which we may view the spots of our souls, and then directing us to that fountain in which we may wash them away.’

This book has the same aim of promoting joyful holiness. It is intended to be a pathway into Psalm 119. The psalm has inexhaustible riches. Every time I come back to it I notice new things. This little book is meant to help us get started in singing it. I hope it may be a helpful first word on the way in; but please don’t expect it to be the last.

I take it that my task is more like that of a singing teacher than a biology teacher. A biology teacher can instruct us how to dissect. But, as has been said, ‘we murder to dissect’. And a psalm is not just to be analysed. It is for the music room, not the mortuary. If I am a singing teacher, I need to do three things.

First, I need to instruct so that we understand the lyrics. This will involve understanding key words such as ‘steadfast love’ in their Old Testament context.

Second, I need to teach the tune (metaphorically) so that we feel it as we sing; we are moved and touched by it as well as instructed by it. For this psalm is thick with emotions. It is not flat, grey, or bland, but full of churning of strong passion.

And, third, I need to motivate so that not only can we sing it, but we want to sing it from the heart.

My task is therefore didactic (teaching the meaning), affectional (tuning in to the feeling) and volitional (moving the will to join in). Some skip the hard work of understanding and go straight to the feelings. The result is fluff, words sung with gusto but the mind not engaged. Others, however, work hard at understanding but never get as far as singing. I have been guilty of this myself. We study the psalm and work hard at its cognitive content; but we are not moved by it. And so we do not join in.

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But we must join in. For this psalm opens for us a window into a world where the people of God love the word of God. It invites us not just to look in through the window as into a strange world, but to climb in, to enter this world and live in it, as we too sing the psalm. So, as we read, let us ask ourselves three questions.

Do I understand it (the didactic question)?

Can I feel it (the affectional question)?

Am I willing to sing it (the volitional question)?

Because the psalm is for singing, instead of calling the writer 'the psalmist' (as a commentary would usually do), I am going to call him or her 'the singer' as a reminder to us that they sing in order that we may join in the song.

I suggest you use this book and my literal translation as a guide to walk with you through the psalm, perhaps over a period of 22 days (one day per section), or even 22 weeks (giving longer to meditate on each section). You might want to use it as a guide for a Bible study group or reading group. Whatever you do, guard time for prayerful response to the psalm, not only to understand it but to sing it from the heart. I have given a couple of personal response questions at the end of each chapter to help with this.