

July 21 Lesson 8 (NIV)

Delightful Precepts

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 30:1–9
Background Scripture: Psalm 119:73–80

Psalm 119:73–80

- ⁷³ Your hands made me and formed me;
give me understanding to learn your commands.
- ⁷⁴ May those who fear you rejoice when they see me,
for I have put my hope in your word.
- ⁷⁵ I know, LORD, that your laws are righteous,
and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.
- ⁷⁶ May your unfailing love be my comfort,
according to your promise to your servant.
- ⁷⁷ Let your compassion come to me that I may live,
for your law is my delight.
- ⁷⁸ May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause;
but I will meditate on your precepts.
- ⁷⁹ May those who fear you turn to me,
those who understand your statutes.
- ⁸⁰ May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees,
that I may not be put to shame.

Key Text

Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands.—
Psalm 119:73

Hope in the Lord

Unit II: Expressing Hope

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Outline

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I. Request for Wisdom (Psalm 119:73–76)

- A. God and His Pupils (vv. 73–74)
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- B. Trust in God (vv. 75–76)

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- A. Learning to Trust, Trusting to Learn
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How to Say It

Moses *Mo-zes* or *Mo-zez*.

Torah (*Hebrew*) *Tor-uh*.

yodh (*Hebrew*) *yode*.

Introduction

A. The Power of Knowledge

“Knowledge is power.” The statement can mean many different things. Awareness of how we are being misled gives us freedom from outside control. Possessing the right skills allows a person to lead or even dominate others. Or withholding information from others can allow us to control them. The vagueness of this proverb reminds us that knowledge can take many forms and serve many purposes.

A better statement might be, “Knowledge can support goodness.” Instead of thinking of knowledge as the path to power, might we think of knowledge as a way of learning to do good and build a better world? Some forms of knowledge and methods of acquiring it have great potential for good.

Knowledge comes to us, of course, through some process of education, whether in formal schools or elsewhere. Healthy patterns of education draw together good teachers and eager students working around a series of questions and concerns that will produce knowledge and transform the lives of those involved in the learning process. In wisdom texts like Psalm 119 or Proverbs or Job, the disciplined pursuit of knowledge involves all sorts of concerns. A wise person

might study many things, ranging from what we would today call the sciences, to languages, to arts and crafts. But most of all, the wise person described in these texts cultivates the art of living.

B. Lesson Context

Psalm 119 takes up the art of living in an almost obsessive way, as it repeatedly turns to the same ideas and figures of speech. It emphasizes the Law of Moses (the Torah) as a guidebook to a life of dignity and moral integrity. It invites faithful people to delight in such a life, not merely endure it.

Psalm 119 is by far the longest poem in the Bible. Its length is due in part to the psalmist's decision to write an acrostic psalm, in which lines would begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This technique was a form used to display a comprehensive approach to the subject of the poem. The same convention appears in various forms in other Old Testament texts, such as Psalms 37; 111; 112, and Lamentations 1–4, among others. Psalm 119 takes the form to its extreme by including eight consecutive lines beginning with the same Hebrew letter. In English, this would mean eight poetic lines that start with the letter *A*, then eight more with *B*, and so on. Twenty-two Hebrew letters multiplied by eight lines equals the 176 verses found in Psalm 119.

While the alphabetically-structured sections are relatively self-contained, several themes and keywords repeatedly appear throughout the psalm. These include various words for the Law of Moses (“commands” [Psalm 119:73]; “laws” [v. 75]; “precepts” [v. 78]; “decrees” [v. 80]; etc.) and the response of the faithful person to the law (“delight” [v. 77]; “comfort” [v. 76]; etc.). In its expression of such ideas, verses 73–80 all begin with the Hebrew letter *yodh*. This section focuses on the psalmist's hope and prayer for a future that will be better than the past.

Like Psalm 71, this section of Psalm 119 portrays God as the teacher and the human praying as the student in the school of life. The student learns the commandments, the Law of Moses, not merely as a set of arbitrary rules, but as a window into the meaning of life. By providing a clear structure to everyday life, the law invites a person to inner peace and openness to the work of the creator God. These commandments rest on God's prior commitment to justice (often paired with or assumed to accompany righteousness). God's deep desire for a fair and fertile world for human beings underlies everything in the revelation at Sinai (Exodus 20; etc.), and it can underlie everything in human life. So this psalm affirms.

I. Request for Wisdom (Psalm 119:73–76)

A. God and His Pupils (vv. 73–74)

73a. Your hands made me and formed me;

One of the challenges that Scripture writers encountered was communicating God's works in earthly terminology. Here the psalmist uses a common practice of ascribing human traits to God, anthropomorphism, even though the reader would know that God is a spirit and does not have a human physique (compare Exodus 7:5; Numbers 6:25; Psalm 34:15; etc.).

The yodh section opens by confessing belief in God as the Creator. God did not create only *me* (the psalmist), but the psalmist is representative of any person who acknowledges God's work in the world, which begins by giving life to every creature therein. The two verbs of creation mean essentially the same thing, though the Hebrew word translated *formed* emphasizes the ongoing nature of God's work. It could be paraphrased, "You have put the finishing touches on me." God's creative work did not end long ago at creation (Genesis 1) but continues in each individual life through creation and re-creation (examples: Psalm 139:13–16; Jeremiah 18:1–6; Ezekiel 11:19; John 3:3–8).

73b. give me understanding to learn your commands.

Since the psalmist acknowledges God as the source of life, it makes sense to ask him for the gift of *understanding* that life (compare James 1:5). Unlike all other creatures known to us, human beings are self-aware and capable of curiosity and existential questioning. We desire to understand. The psalmist knows, of course, that we can learn from many sources, but the plea here is for God to take up the role of a teacher (compare Psalms 25:4–5; 86:11). As Creator, God knows all things and cares deeply for all creatures. Therefore, God is in the best position to teach a person how to live.

This is why the psalmist asks for God's help to grow in knowledge, especially about his *commands* and their requirements (see Psalm 119:80, below). Like Psalms 1 and 19, this text assumes that God's laws are not simply orders that compliant people obey without question or feeling. Quite to the contrary, the commandments invite the believer into a world of wholeness and wonder. Understanding their meaning and interconnectedness requires a lifetime of attentiveness. That attentiveness, in turn, requires God's help if comprehension is to result.

74. May those who fear you rejoice when they see me, for I have put my hope in your word.

Psalm 119 often mentions the wicked who resist God (119:53, 61, 95, etc.), but here our text introduces a different group: those who *fear* God (see 119:79, below; also 119:63). These people share the speaker's confidence in God's promises (example: 33:18–22), and they rejoice in finding a like-minded person in the psalmist.

But when do they *see* such a person? Most likely, this is a reference to an audience hearing the psalmist read or sing his praise at the temple. In such a situation, they would *rejoice* because they recognized the truth of the psalmist's words. This was only possible because the psalmist hopes *in* God's *word*, not human sources of knowledge or wisdom (compare 1 Corinthians 3:19).

From another point of view, this verse underscores the nature of the faithful community. This community exists because it has found hope in God's promises, learning from divine revelation the vastness of God's care for the creation and each human in it. The members of that community have come to see the world not as totally evil but as potentially good. They find their lives meaningful. That is why they rejoice in finding a like-minded person (compare Luke 15:7; Philippians 2:2). This emphasis on acceptance by other faithful people contrasts with the theme in psalms of lament of persecution by evil persons (see lesson 7).

B. Trust in God (vv. 75–76)

75a. I know, LORD, that your laws are righteous,

Alongside words of hope come words of evaluation and reformation (Psalm 119:75b, below). The Hebrew word translated *laws* can also mean “practice” (1 Samuel 2:13) or “manner” (Joshua 6:15). This verse seems to play with these nuances and on judgments as God’s ordinances for his people. *Righteous laws* (Psalm 119:106, 138, 160, 164) go hand-in-glove with just laws (Deuteronomy 16:20); the image of the righteous life as following a straight and narrow path is fitting here (Matthew 7:13–14). Following God’s instructions creates the conditions required for human thriving. God’s prescribed patterns of life create in those following them a commitment to just dealings with all others (example: Deuteronomy 16:19–20), without which no one can please God (Micah 6:6–8; example: James 2:14–17).

75b. and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me.

The second clause repeats the basic idea of the first but takes it in a new direction. The psalmist perceives God’s judgments as naturally flowing from God’s *faithfulness*. Another way of saying this would be that if God did not judge sin, he would be unfaithful to his character and word (compare Psalm 33:4; Revelation 19:11). God has rightly *afflicted* (with the sense of being humbled, as in Exodus 10:3) the person praying.

Humility before God is always the appropriate posture for his creatures, and the humble person accepts the resulting suffering as an opportunity for education (compare James 4:10). Like all good teachers, God does not shy away from allowing the pupil to struggle in order to learn important lessons (Romans 8:24–28). And the good student recognizes adversity as a chance to learn. The psalmist had personally experienced the judgment of the Lord when he lost his way. This verse reflects that experience (compare Psalm 119:67).

The book of Psalms considers suffering from various angles. Suffering may be punishment for sin, or it may come undeserved from evil persons. In the first case, the one praying seeks forgiveness (example: Psalm 51:10–17), and in the second, deliverance (example: 55:1–3).

76. May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant.

In a third case (see Psalm 119:75b, above), the person praying may thank God for the lesson contained in affliction while also seeking some relief (example: 2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

The *unfailing love* of God is not a random act but is better understood as the expression of his covenant loyalty. It comes from a deep relationship based on God’s promises and the human acceptance of those promises. Just as Abraham and Sarah had a child in their old age after they trusted God to do the impossible (Genesis 21:1–7), the psalmist stands in a relationship of deep trust in the Creator, whose promises come true in time.

The last clause assumes that God has promised to console and that God’s *promise* can be counted on. Based on the psalmist’s knowledge of God’s promises, he asks that God in mercy will work to *comfort* the psalmist amid suffering. The heavenly teacher provides proper support when the lesson is the hardest to learn. Therefore, the person of faith can count on God’s statements of favor and promises to deliver, just as Moses did when arguing for God to forgive Israel after the episode of the golden calf (Exodus 33:12–16).

II. Hope for the Future (Psalm 119:77–80)

A. The Righteous and the Wicked (vv. 77–78)

77a. Let your compassion come to me that I may live,

The idea that God shows *compassion* is common in the Psalms and texts about Israelite worship more generally (Exodus 34:6; Nehemiah 9:31; Psalms 111:4; 112:4; etc.). Without such mercy, no one could not survive, let alone thrive.

77b. for your law is my delight.

The second part of this verse explains the basis for the prayer and the confidence that God will answer it. The psalmist takes pleasure in the *law* (compare Psalm 1:2). The Hebrew word translated *delight* is relatively rare in the Old Testament. Isaiah 5:7 uses it (there translated “delighted”) to refer to Judah. Proverbs 8:30 speaks of Wisdom herself as God’s source of delight, similar to a favorite child, and then 8:31 speaks of the pleasure God and Wisdom take in the human race. Most occurrences, however, appear in Psalm 119 itself (vv. 24, 77, 92, 143, 174). In each of those cases, the human being finds pleasure in God’s commandments because they can preserve life, protect from various enemies, and provide stability in an unstable world.

The instructions in wise and righteous living that the Torah—given to Moses by God for Israel’s benefit (Deuteronomy 4:1–2)—provides foster joy in the person dedicated to following those laws. The person who pursues life in and with God will experience joy, even amidst trials (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18). Far from being a burden to be endured, the law orients a faithful person to a deeply meaningful pattern of life (example: Psalm 1:1–3). By taking seriously the role of the student (see also 119:73b, above), the psalmist enters into a deep relationship with God. This relationship is filled with delight at learning God’s ways.

78. May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause; but I will meditate on your precepts.

In contrast, some people become so consumed by their pride that they attack those like the psalmist who try to live virtuously. To wrong someone *without cause* can be understood as slandering or lying (like “cheating” in Amos 8:5). In doing so, *the arrogant* brought the righteous person harm. By meditating on God’s *precepts*, the psalmist can avoid becoming a perpetrator of the abuse he suffered at others’ hands.

God’s instructions provide a different mindset and pattern of life for the faithful person. We can imagine how, if all people were striving to keep God’s laws, we would be more protected against evil. But even without others committing to a righteous path, those who choose it can learn to reject unjust words and actions and find a centered, joy-filled, meaningful life even during a time of trouble.

B. Trust in God (vv. 79–80)

79. May those who fear you turn to me, those who understand your statutes.

This verse picks up the theme of verse 74, bringing the yodh section of the psalm full circle (see also Psalm 119:80, below). Focus turns from the individual back to the group. It invites anyone listening to join the psalmist in a way of life—to enroll in God’s school, as it were. The congregation hearing this psalm, the ones who *fear* God, should *turn* to the psalmist and join in the song (compare Jeremiah 15:19). These fellow worshippers have the correct stance toward God and the correct knowledge. They are fellow students of their Creator, aware of the long

legacy of promises and fulfillments in Israel's history, steeped in its stories and ethical and spiritual commitments.

80. May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees, that I may not be put to shame.

The yodh section ends as it began, by asking for help in learning with not just the right intellectual skills but the right attitudes and dispositions of the heart (see Psalm 119:73, above). In Hebrew, the phrase can imply perfection (example: Genesis 6:9), being without blemish or spot (examples: Exodus 12:5; Numbers 19:2), and/or sincerity (example: Joshua 24:14). The attitude matters as much as the method of thinking or the results of learning God's *decrees*.

All of these elements must go together for the educational experience to succeed fully—*that I may not be put to shame*. The psalmist is fully committed to learning and carrying out the details of the law. In doing so, he would not suffer social stigma or be humiliated. Rather, the person who does this joins a great company of like-minded persons across the ages.

Conclusion

A. Learning to Trust, Trusting to Learn

The psalmist did not simply obey rules. He enjoyed a relationship with God. That relationship was full of dignity and moral depth. The Law was not just a set of rules but a guide to a meaningful life. God's Law contains the secrets of spiritual growth for the people of Israel and, to a certain extent, for Christians as well. We affirm this when we learn from the writers of Scripture who grew and learned because of their reverence for God's Law. A life of obedience should not be burdensome but joyful.

Still, Psalm 119 acknowledges the presence of hostile forces, in this case, fellow human beings who sought the righteous person's harm in some unspecified way. The pursuit of wise living does not guarantee that one will enjoy universal respect. In fact, when we seek God and follow his ways, we should expect to be very unpopular, at least sometimes. Yet the faithful person perseveres without fear or anger, confident in the ultimate triumph of God's mercy and goodness.

Beyond the psalmist, these verses assumed the existence of a faithful community of like-minded people. They trusted each other and worked toward building a better world that expects goodness from its Creator. They did so in part by fostering a life of celebration. While they did not ignore or pretend away the negative dimensions of life, they saw something more behind them. Their hopeful, trusting attitude inspires us to live similarly.

Such an education requires faithful persons to free themselves from fear, prejudice, anger, greed, lust, and other vices. One of the principal causes of social discord in modern societies is the loss of trust in others and their honorable intentions. Certainly, some people cannot be trusted. But an attitude of mistrust can spread like cancer and divide even those whose actions are honorable and whose intentions are good. In resistance to such a tendency, Psalm 119 and others like it open the door to the possibility of mutual trust. This stance of informed, reasonable trust begins with trust in God as the Creator and educator, who draws anyone willing into a meaningful life. That stance allows us to learn from others, to check our pride, and to weed out our prejudices and fears. In short, true education for life requires trust. Only then can the delight in God become a reality in our lives.

B. Prayer

Father God, our Creator, you have fashioned us and continue to shape us into the image of Christ. Help us to understand to whatever degree we can your gracious movements in your creation, your care for all things, your love for us, and your desire that we grow in wisdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Learn what the Lord desires!¹
