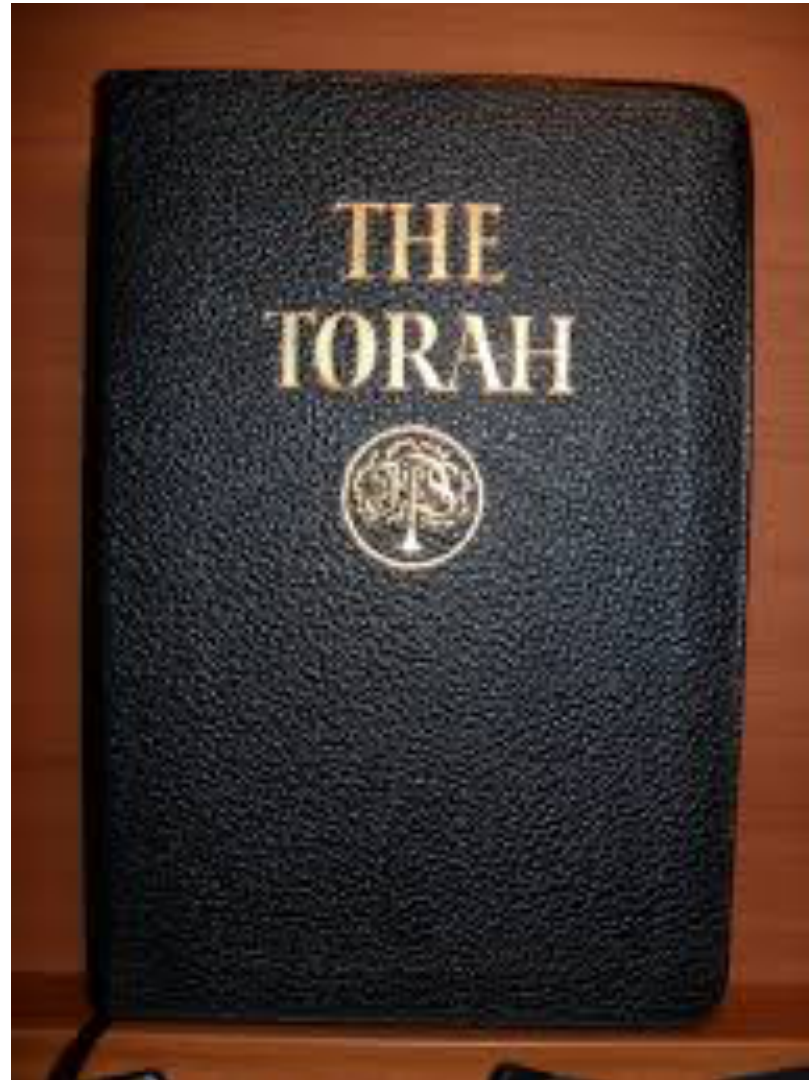


o8. Psalm 119

Praying Psalm 119 with Jesus



Psalm 119 is an acrostic psalm. Each line in the first stanza begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each line in the second stanza begins with the second letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and so on throughout the psalm. In including the whole alphabet in this way, the psalmist conveys the idea of God's all-encompassing will.

Before commenting on Psalm 119, it is good to recall Psalm 19:7-11

7GOD's law is perfect; it revives the soul.

GOD's decrees are sure; they make wise the simple.

8GOD's precepts are right; they delight the heart.

GOD's commandment is clear; it enlightens the eyes.

9The awe inspired by GOD is pure and enduring.

GOD's judgments are true and all of them just.

10More precious are they than gold, than the finest gold;

sweeter are they than honey dripping from a comb.

11Your servant is enlightened by them.

In keeping them there is great reward.

<sup>1</sup>Blessed and happy are those whose lives are blameless,  
who follow GOD's law,

<sup>2</sup>Blessed and happy are those who keep GOD's decrees  
seeking God with all their heart,

<sup>3</sup>who do no wrong, but follow GOD's way.

<sup>4</sup>You have laid down your precepts  
to be observed with care.

<sup>5</sup>O that I was steadfast in keeping your statutes!

<sup>6</sup>I would be without shame,  
if only my eyes were fixed on your commandments.

<sup>7</sup>I praise you with an upright heart,  
as I learn your righteous judgments.

<sup>8</sup>Hold me close to you,  
and I will observe your statutes.

<sup>1</sup>Blessed and happy are those who follow GOD's law,

It is important from the outset to state that the word 'law' does not satisfactorily convey the meaning intended by the Hebrew word *Torah*. The Concise Oxford Dictionary gives as its first definition of law: 'a body of enacted or customary rules recognised by a community as binding.' This is a fairly adequate definition of the Greek word *nomos* which the English 'law' translates.

However behind the Greek *nomos* stands the Hebrew *Torah*, which is perhaps better translated as 'instruction', or 'way'. It includes what we intend by 'law', but has a broader as well as a more precise application.

We find *Torah* being used for the way God reveals God's will via a specific oracle issued by a priest or a prophet. From this it came to stand for the totality of the way God has revealed God's Self and God's will through the history of dealings with the people of Israel. In this sense Torah ('law') is synonymous with the whole of Israelite tradition, written (the Scriptures), and oral. In this sense 'law' can be the equivalent of 'the religion of Israel.'

When the Scriptures were given a more definite form in the period after the exile, the word *Torah* came also to be used in a more restricted sense for the first five books of the Jewish canon: the Book of Genesis and the Books concerned with Moses (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). An example of this usage is found in the Prologue to the Book of Sirach: 'Many great teachings have been given to us through the Torah and the Prophets and the other Writings that followed them.'

For the rest of this reflection we use the word ‘**law**’ in its widest application as ‘the revelation from God found in the writings and traditions of Israel.’ This is the meaning it has in Psalms 19 and 119. Committed as he is to doing God’s will, the psalmist in Stanza One speaks also of God’s ‘**decrees**’ (instructions backed by divine testimony), God’s ‘**way**’ (the path we are to follow), God’s ‘**precepts**’ (obligations of special importance), God’s ‘**statutes**’ (God’s will engraved on stone or parchment), God’s ‘**commandments**’, and God’s ‘**judgments**’.

Stanza Two will speak of God’s ‘**word**’ (verse 9; God’s will as revealed in creation and history), and God’s ‘**promise**’ (verse 11). In Psalm 119 the psalmist loves to play with all these words to speak of the centrality of obeying God’s will. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we recall his absolute commitment to doing the will of his Father (see Presentation 1).

## Living according to the law as an experience of salvation

It is clear from the whole of the New Testament that the law (Torah) was treasured as a genuine revelation of God and that living according to the law was a genuine experience of salvation. This remained the understanding of the Christian community when the Church saw itself as distinct from the Jewish synagogue and was increasingly Gentile.

This is clear from the theological writings of Irenaeus. In his famous work *Against Heresies: a refutation and subversion of knowledge falsely so called* (180AD), he writes: ‘God formed humankind ... but chose the patriarchs for the sake of humankind’s salvation, and prepared a people ... and raised up prophets upon earth, accustoming people to bear his Spirit and to hold communion with God’ (AH IV,14,2).

The Bible records the religious experience of a people, many of whom in living their religion came to close communion with God. One has only to pray the psalms to realise this truth. Using a remarkably evocative image, which applies not only to Judaism (the 'law') but to all that is genuine in every human religion, Irenaeus continues: 'God put the human race together in many ways to effect a symphony of salvation' (AH IV,14,2).

For Irenaeus, and for Christians generally, Christianity is not just one among many religions, including Judaism. We find expressions of the Word of God in every human expression of truth. We find the life-giving activity of the Spirit of God in every genuine religious experience. In Christianity, however, we have the Word of God finding perfect human expression ('incarnation') in Jesus.



Once again, Irenaeus: ‘The person who is truly spiritual, knowing always the same God, and always acknowledging the same Word of God (although he has but now been manifested to us), and acknowledging also at all times the same Spirit of God (although he has been poured out upon us after a new fashion in these last times) will know that he descends even from the creation of the world to its end upon the human race, from whom those who believe God and follow God’s word receive that salvation which flows from God’ (AH IV,33.15).

The Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (‘*Dei Verbum*’, 1965) reminds us: ‘Through Moses, with the race of Israel, God acquired a people for God’s Self, and to them he revealed God’s Self in words and deeds as the one, true, living God, so that Israel might experience the ways of God with people’ (DV n.14).

## Jesus and the Law

Again and again the Gospels speak of Jesus fulfilling what has been written in the sacred Scriptures. From Jesus' opening words, it is clear that Matthew intends to portray Jesus as wanting to 'fulfil all righteousness' (3:15). In the wilderness, he remains obedient to God's will (4:1-10). He has come to fulfil the law and he demands obedience to God's revealed will from his disciples (5:17-19; 7:21; 12:50).

Matthew would agree with Paul that the law is a 'gift' from God (Romans 9:4); that it is 'holy' (Romans 7:12) and 'good' (Romans 7:12) and 'beautiful' (Romans 7:16), and that it reveals God's fidelity to his covenant of love (what Paul calls his 'justice', Romans 1:32; 2:26; 7:12). It is God's Spirit who breathes through the law (Romans 7:14). Besides revealing God, it directs us how to respond to God, and therefore helps us to recognise our sinfulness (Romans 3:20; 7:7; Galatians 3:19).

Matthew presents Jesus as the goal of God's revelation found in the law. It is he who brings it to perfection. He demands the same perfection from his disciples who are to obey God's will from the heart with a 'righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees' (5:20; see 5:21 - 6:18). They can learn to do this only from the Son:

'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:27-30).

Jesus as the fulfilment of the law (and the prophets) is expressed dramatically in what is commonly called the Transfiguration: 'There appeared to the disciples Moses [symbolic of the law] and Elijah [symbolic of the prophets] talking with Jesus ... Then from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' ... When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone' (Matthew 17:3,5,8).

To obey God's will expressed in the law we must listen to Jesus and share in Jesus' faith, hope and love (Galatians 2:15-21; Romans 3:31; 10:4). It is because Christ lives in his followers that they are able to carry out the just requirements of the law (Galatians 3:2,5; Romans 8:4). It is the love of Christ experienced in the Christian community which is the fulfilment of the law (Galatians 5:14; 6:2; Romans 13:10).

Jesus' relationship to the law is summed up in the opening words of the Letter to the Hebrews: 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds' (Hebrews 1:1-2).

This same point is made by Irenaeus: 'The patriarchs and prophets sowed the word concerning Christ, but the Church reaped, that is, received the fruit ... both the sower and the reaper may rejoice together in the kingdom of Christ, who is present with all those who were from the beginning approved by God who granted them his Word to be present with them' (AH IV,25,3).

Likewise by the Second Vatican Council: 'The most intimate truth which revelation gives us about God and human salvation shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation' (DV, n.2).

'God taught them to look for the promised saviour. And so, throughout the ages, he prepared the way for the Gospel' (DV, n.3).

'Jesus Christ completed and perfected revelation' (DV, n.4).

## Removing the limitations of the law

It is important to recognise the essentially human and so limited understanding of God and of ourselves that we find expressed in the Sacred Scriptures. See our reflection on this in Presentation One. This point is stressed in a document issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993). A few passages should suffice: ‘Scripture reveals the meaning of the events which bring revelation to fulfilment and the events reveal the meaning of Scripture, that is, they require that certain aspects of the received interpretation be set aside and a new interpretation adopted’ (pages 91-92).

In other words all understandings found in the law concerning God, God's ways with the human race, and our response to God must be looked at anew in the light of the events that fulfil the law – that is to say, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus: 'The exegete need not put absolute value in something which simply reflects limited human understanding' (page 94). 'The Word of God finds expression in the work of human authors. The thought and the words belong at one and the same time both to God and to human beings, in such a way that the whole Bible comes at once from God and from the inspired human author. This does not mean, however, that God has given the historical conditioning of the message a value which is absolute' (page 113). 'Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language' (pages 132-133).



The law, however good, was imperfect, incomplete. It had to give way before the revelation of the Word-made-flesh. Matthew, like Paul, held that the limitations and imperfections of the law had to be let go when they failed to express the revelation of God and of God's will given by him who is 'the lord of the sabbath' (12:8).

Paul writes: 'You have died to the law through the Body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God ... We are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit' (Romans 7:4,6).

This does not mean that the law has lost its value. It does mean that it now has to be treasured as seen through the eyes of Jesus and as understood with his mind. The law indicates the way to communion with God, but now it has come to its goal, now we have experienced its flowering, now we can read it in its proper perspective and discern more accurately what is of God and where limited human perception was unable to receive God's Word without distortion.

Disciples of Jesus are not bound to observe all the detailed prescriptions of the law. Many of the laws will express lasting human values, values embraced by Jesus himself. A Jew, becoming a Christian, will find much in his religious tradition that is of lasting value. A Gentile, becoming a Christian, will be enriched by coming to know and follow the divine guidance found in the law.

However, the early Christian community recognised that it was not necessary to become a Jew in order to become a Christian, for the basis of a person's communion with God was not conformity to the law but communion with Jesus. For Paul, as no doubt for many Jews who became disciples of Jesus, this was experienced as a deliberate and painful shift, likened to a death: 'By works of the law shall no one be justified ... For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live in the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose' (Galatians 2:16,19-21).

'If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the Law' (Galatians 5:18).

‘Their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains, unlifted, because only through Christ is it being annulled. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts; but when a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed’ (2 Corinthians 3:14-16).

In Matthew’s Gospel we have already seen Jesus setting aside injunctions accepted as law by his contemporaries. Jesus touches lepers (8:3), eats with sinners (9:11). He does not follow the Sabbath regulations expected by the religious authorities of his day. Jesus’ followers did not follow the cultic food laws (Acts 10-11), nor did they accept the necessity of circumcision as a requirement of belonging to God’s people (Acts 15). Following Jesus’ teaching they did not accept the barrier between Jews (judged to be ‘holy’) and Gentiles (judged to be ‘unclean’).

It is still obvious today that people find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to let go practices which have been part of their religious identity. Many of Jesus' contemporaries, especially those responsible for preserving the tradition, were no exception. Jesus was crucified because he was seen as a threat to the temple and to all that the temple stood for (26:61; see Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Jesus' followers were to meet a similar fate (Acts 6:13; Acts 7; Acts 21:28).

The other side to this is that many recognised in Jesus the fulfilment of their religious aspirations, and the flowering of the law. They found in his love the power to be liberated from sin – something they were unable to do within the confines of the law.

**'Blessed and happy are those who keep God's decrees, seeking God with all their heart'** (verse 2). Note that obedience to the law is within the context of seeking God.

## Stanza One

<sup>1</sup>Blessed and happy are those whose lives are blameless,  
who follow GOD's law,

<sup>2</sup>Blessed and happy are those who keep GOD's decrees  
seeking God with all their heart,

<sup>3</sup>who do no wrong, but follow GOD's way.

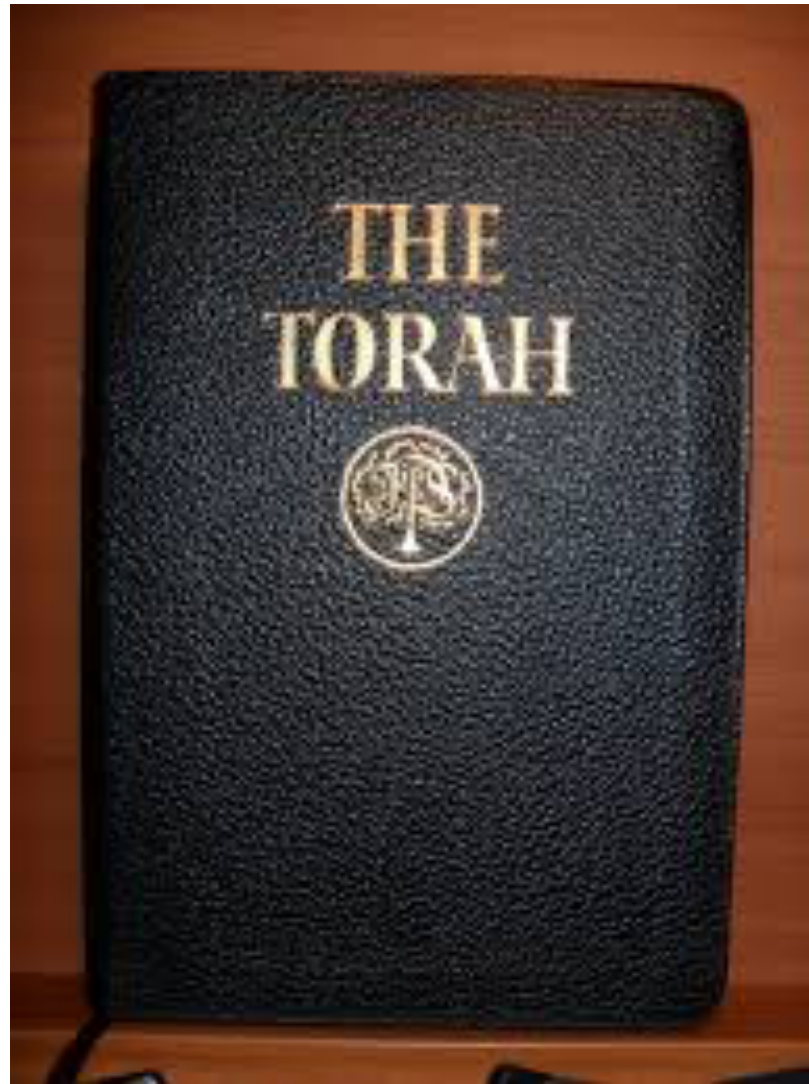
<sup>4</sup>You have laid down your precepts  
to be observed with care.

<sup>5</sup>O that I was steadfast in keeping your statutes!

<sup>6</sup>I would be without shame,  
if only my eyes were fixed on your commandments.

<sup>7</sup>I praise you with an upright heart,  
as I learn your righteous judgments.

<sup>8</sup>Hold me close to you,  
and I will observe your statutes.



Take, Lord, receive