

OpenTheo

December 18th: Psalm 119:49-72 & Revelation 10

December 17, 2020



Alastair Roberts

Learning faithfulness through affliction. Receiving the little book from the mighty angel to eat.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Psalm 119 verses 49 to 72 Zion, remember your word to your servant, in which you have made me hope. This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life. The insolent utterly deride me, but I do not turn away from your law.

When I think of your rules from of old, I take comfort, O Lord. Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, who forsake your law. Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my sojourning.

I remember your name in the night, O Lord, and keep your law. This blessing has fallen to me, that I have kept your precepts. Hathe, the Lord is my portion.

I promise to keep your words. I entreat your favor with all my heart. Be gracious to me according to your promise.

When I think on my ways, I turn my feet to your testimonies. I hasten and do not delay to keep your commandments. Though the cords of the wicked ensnare me, I do not forget your law.

At midnight I rise to praise you, because of your righteous rules. I am a companion of all who fear you, of those who keep your precepts. The earth, O Lord, is full of your steadfast love.

Teach me your statutes. Tethe, you have dealt well with your servant, O Lord, according to your word. Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments.

Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word. You are good and do good. Teach me your statutes.

The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts. Their heart is unfeeling like fat, but I delight in your law. It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.

The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. Psalm 119 is an extended meditation upon the law. It is an acrostic psalm with twenty-two sections of eight verses, each beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

It expresses the wonder and the importance of the law of God, playing upon seven synonyms for the law. The terms seem to be interchangeable, although there may be slightly varying shades of meaning. It can seem very repetitive at first glance, but it invites the person who sings it to meditate and reflect more deeply upon the law, by turning its meaning and importance over again and again in his mind in various ways.

The purpose of this practice is to learn wisdom. In this psalm, the hearer, reader or singer learns more fully that the law is not merely something to be obeyed, but something closely to be observed and attended to, in order that they may gain wisdom and find delight in the ways and the words of the Lord. It is likely that this psalm would have been divided into its component parts, rather than being recited in full on every single occasion.

However, its acrostic form lends itself to memorisation, and invites the reader to think of it in terms of completeness, covering all of the bases from aleph to tau. The seventh section begins in verse 49. The psalmist opens by asking the Lord to remember his word.

The Lord's promise and words are a source of comfort and assurance for him in his affliction. Even in his situation where all seems bleak, he can take hold of what God has said, what God has promised, knowing that the Lord will surely bring it to pass. He is surrounded by people who deride him and attack him, but yet he holds fast to the law of God.

He finds comfort in these things, clinging on to them. However, when he looks around and sees the wicked, he is indignant at their forsaking of the law, and of the Lord who gave it. He is keenly aware of the glory that is due to the Lord, and feels a righteous anger when the Lord is not glorified as he ought to be.

Perhaps it is through these experiences that he feels himself more keenly to be a sojourner, as he has already described himself within the psalm. As a sojourner, the statutes or law of the Lord both arouse him to sing, and serve as the content of his song. He has called for the Lord to remember him, and he remembers the name of the Lord in the night.

Indeed, he sees this keeping of the law as something that has fallen to him as a blessing, an inheritance that has been granted him by God and his goodness. In the 8th stanza, the psalmist speaks of the Lord as his portion. This is the same sort of language that is used of the Levites in Numbers 18.20. Here it expresses the fact that everything that the psalmist relies upon, everything that he possesses, comes from the Lord. It is to the Lord that he looks for everything that is important to him.

He reflects carefully upon his ways. Out of careful and sustained self-examination, he moves into a commitment to keep God's law, which he does not tarry in keeping. He observes God's ways without any delay.

When facing troubles, he does not lose his focus upon the law of God. When afflicted with troubles, he does not abandon the law of God, but commits himself more faithfully to it. Waking up in the middle of the night, he praises the Lord on account of his rules.

He seeks and finds community with those who are faithful to the law. Keeping good company is a common theme within the Psalms, and particularly within the wisdom literature. We can see it in Psalm 1 for instance.

Keeping the company of the righteous and avoiding the company of the wicked is part of how the righteous guard their way. In the 9th stanza, he expresses the goodness of the Lord. The Lord has acted faithfully towards him.

He has kept his promise. And the psalmist prays that the Lord would teach him good judgment and knowledge. He believes in God's commandment.

He believes that it is a source of goodness, and he prays that he would understand it more fully, that he would be granted the good taste to discern his inner wisdom, and that in such a manner he would grow in his spiritual life. Such growth is also expressed in verse 67. There was a time when he went astray from the law of God, and it was through the discipline and the affliction that the Lord brought to him that now he keeps the word of God.

He knows that God is good, and God's goodness is seen in the way that he acts, he does

good. For this reason he prays that the Lord would teach him his statutes, so that in keeping his statutes he might enter into a fuller appreciation and enjoyment of God's goodness. His valuing of the law of God is seen in the way that he values everything else.

Faced with the smears and the sneers of the insolent and the ungodly, he continues to cling to the word of God and is not distracted from God's law. He delights in it. Even at the experience of the difficult discipline of the Lord, he rejoices because he has found it to be a way of learning God's law more fully.

He concludes the ninth stanza by expressing its greater value to him than all these treasures and riches, when in possession and in observance of God's law, he feels himself to be richer than if he were in possession of great material wealth. A question to consider, how can the psalmist's statements in this passage help us to understand the value of God's discipline? He had a little scroll open in his hand, and he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice like a lion roaring. When he called out the seven thunders sounded, and when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.

And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven, and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet called to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets. Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again saying, Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land. So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll, and he said to me, Take and eat it.

It will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey. And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter.

And I was told, You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings. As we reach Revelation chapter 10, it might be worthwhile to step back from the text briefly to consider why the book is written in the way that it is. Why doesn't God just say what he means directly? If, for instance, God wants to talk about the bringing of judgement upon diaspora Jews as the gospel goes out into the wider empire, or of the corruption of the temple, why doesn't he say so expressly and explicitly? Why present these things in such obscure symbolic language and with almost hallucinogenic imagery, which the overwhelming majority of people won't be able to understand? Indeed, it seems to be written in a way that almost invites misunderstanding.

Many modern readers of the text of Revelation, for instance, have seen Apache helicopters in the Scorpion locus and an immense army from an Asian bloc of nations in the twice 10,000 times 10,000 of the preceding chapter. Although such readings of Revelation have countless problems, they do at least relieve some of the questions about the symbolism, believing that much of it should be taken more literally or as more impressionistic representations of future realities, for which John and the first heroes of Revelation would not have had any words, such as four Apache helicopters. Other commentators have suggested that the book of Revelation is closer to a sort of code, adopted in order to hide the true reference of its prophecies in a context of persecution.

The authorities would only perceive strange and fantastical imagery from a weird Eastern cult, but the informed Christian reader would know that it was foretelling the downfall of the Roman Empire or something like that. Reading the book of Revelation as if it were a sort of code, we will tend to look for one-to-one correlations between its images and real-world reference. However, as we have been working through this book, we have consistently seen that its symbolism and imagery establishes multiple connections, associations, juxtapositions and the like.

The imagery has the effect of transposing events into, or mapping events onto, frameworks offered by such things as the temple and its sacrifices, by the festal calendar and the great events of redemptive history, or by the fundamental patterns of the created order, sun, moon, stars, sea, land, etc. In this way, the imagery does a lot more than communicate events that are going to occur. It communicates their deeper meaning and significance.

It reveals the connection between heaven and earth, presenting seemingly chaotic events in history in terms of a profoundly ordered process of worship in heaven. By revealing these processes behind the events of history, we are instructed in deep mysteries, not merely concerning events in the first century AD, but also concerning events throughout history down to our present day. By mapping these events of history onto the feasts and the worship of the temple, something about their covenant significance is also disclosed.

These are the events that bring the age of the old covenant to its close, an age that overlapped with the new covenant for about 40 years, but which is finally to be dismantled. While many think of the events recorded in Revelation primarily in terms of events that make a huge splash in human history, Revelation teaches us to view things from a different perspective. From a human vantage point, the rejection of the early church's message and persecution by the Jews in the Diaspora may be felt to be a discouraging setback.

From a heavenly perspective, however, it is a great burning mountain being cast into the sea, turning a third of the sea to blood, killing a third of the living creatures and

destroying a third of the ships. Whatever it might seem like from an earthly vantage point, the events occurring are truly of cosmic importance, an epoch defining significance. This is not code, but it grants struggling and persecuted Christians a very different vantage point upon their situations.

In Revelation chapter 10, we are still in the 6th trumpet part of the book. As in the case of the open seals, a number of preparatory events must occur before the blowing of the climactic 7th trumpet. Remarking upon the description of the mighty angel descending from heaven, a number of commentators argue that it seems to be a divine figure.

Greg Beale claims, for instance, that he is given attributes that are given only to God in the Old Testament, or to God or Christ in Revelation. Furthermore, this would not be the first or the only time in scripture more generally, or in Revelation in particular, that the figure of the One like a Son of Man is presented as an angelic one. We see a similar association in Revelation chapter 14 verses 14-16 and also in the book of Daniel, where the One like a Son of Man is closely related to, or even identified with the figure of the Archangel Michael.

The mighty angel comes wrapped in a cloud, like God himself, and the figure of the One like a Son of Man. The rainbow over his head, and the description of the mighty angel's feet, also recall the rainbow of chapter 4 verse 3, in addition to the vision of Ezekiel chapter 1, especially the description of verses 27-28. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around.

And downward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him, like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around, such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking. The background of Ezekiel's vision in chapters 1-3 of the book of Ezekiel will continue to be important in what follows.

The mighty angel's face, shining like the sun, recalls the description of Christ, both at the transfiguration on the mount, and also in the vision at the beginning of the book. Matthew chapter 17 verse 2, And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And Revelation chapter 1 verse 16, In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

The description of Jesus' legs in Revelation chapter 1 was as of burnished bronze refined in a furnace. Now they are described as like pillars of fire, recalling the means by which the Lord led Israel in the wilderness, as if the pillar of cloud and fire by which the Lord went before his people were vast legs by which he walked with them. He calls out with a loud voice like that of a lion, by which we are reminded that Jesus is the Lion of Judah.

Peter Lighthouse presents all of the parallels between the angel and Jesus, but does not directly identify the two. Rather he reminds us of the first verse of the book, the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.

The mighty angel is not Jesus himself but his angel, and the angel or the messenger of Christ is the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sends to his people. Perhaps a clue to this identity can be seen in the glory phenomena of the cloud, fire and rainbow involved. In this figure in chapter 10 we are finally told about the angel that Jesus Christ sent to John that is mentioned in the first verse of the book.

With the delivery of this book to John we are also finally reaching the point of revelation of what is going to take place. What has been revealed to this point has largely related to events from the ascension onwards, all leading up to the opening, heralding and delivery of the prophetic book. The angel stands with his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land.

The sea, as we have already seen, is associated with the Gentiles and the land with the Jews. In the descent of the spirit angel, heaven and earth are connected, and land and sea are connected, as the kingdom of Christ is stretching out beyond the land. Seven thunders sound when the spirit angel calls out, and John is about to write down their contents.

However, rather than having their word dictated to him, John will bear the word in a very different way. He is instructed not to write down the words of the seven thunders, which, we should presume, are the contents of the book that are open in the angel's hand. The identity of the book in the spirit angel's hand should be considered.

The book is open, and would, most naturally, be related to the book or the scroll that has been at the heart of the prophecy to this point, the book that was opened with the opening of the seven seals and that is being heralded in the seven trumpets. The book, which is now opened, can be delivered. The fact that it is described as a little book need not imply that it is a different book, although it might be an earthly book that is a counterpart to the heavenly book that the Lamb opened.

As usual, the keys to the meaning of the book of Revelation are largely found in the rest of the scripture. Recognising those passages that provide the backdrop enables us to unpack the meaning of what is taking place. Without great familiarity with the keys that the scripture provides, however, we will be baffled by much within the text.

Here, the end of the book of Daniel is the key background. Daniel's revelation was sealed up in a book, which wouldn't be open until the time of the end. Daniel chapter 12 verses 4-9 But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the end.

Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase. Then I, Daniel, looked, and behold, two others stood, one on this bank of the stream, and one on that bank of the stream. And someone said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, How long shall it be till the end of these wonders? And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and swore by him who lives for ever, that it would be for a time, times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all these things would be finished.

I heard, but did not understand. Then I said, O my Lord, what shall be the outcome of these things? He said, Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end. The man clothed in linen was earlier described in Daniel chapter 10 verses 5-6.

I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Euphaz around his waist, his body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude. This description closely resembles the vision of Christ in Revelation chapter 1 and of the mighty spirit angel in this chapter. In Daniel this figure swears by him who lives for ever, that the opening of the book and the fulfilment of its prophecies awaited the time of the end, a time that will come after a time, times, and half a time.

Now a similar figure makes a similar oath, but the oath now is that the time of the end has come, the time is up and the mystery of God would finally be fulfilled, the long awaited kingdom would finally be established. John is instructed by the voice from heaven, presumably the voice of Christ, to take the open scroll from the angel. Rather than having the contents of the book dictated to him, John is instructed to take the book and to eat it, so it will become part of him.

There is a similar account in the book of Ezekiel chapter 3 verses 1 to 3. And he said to me, Son of man, eat whatever you find here, eat this scroll, and go speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. And he said to me, Son of man, feed your belly with the scroll that I give you, and fill your stomach with it.

Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. The description of the book given to Ezekiel is found in chapter 2 verses 9 to 10 of the book. And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it.

And he spread it out before me, and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation, and mourning, and woe. The sealed book was described in a similar way in Revelation chapter 5 verse 1. The bitterness of the words of the book might recall the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5, where curses were written down in a book, scraped off into a drink of bitter water, which had to be

drunk by the woman accused of adultery. If she were indeed unfaithful, the ingested words would poison her.

The words of the prophecy given to John is just such a test of jealousy, as we will see with the judgment upon the whore of Babylon later in the book. The loud voice of the spirit angel, connected with the seven thunders, will now be expressed through the prophetic ministry of John and the church. A question to consider, how might John's eating of the book help us as we think about our relationship with the Word of God as the people of God?