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December 17th: Psalm 119:1-24 & Revelation 9

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Psalm 119 as an extended meditation on the Torah. Scorpion locusts from the abyss and four angels unbound at the River Euphrates.

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

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Transcript

Psalm 119 verses 1-24 Psalm 119 is the longest of all of the Psalms, 176 verses in length. It's structured as an alphabetical acrostic. There are 22 sections of 8 verses each.

Each section begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in ascending order. As an alphabetical acrostic, it suggests a comprehensive character and invites a certain sort of meditation. Each of the fundamental springs of language, the letters of the alphabet, are successively and collectively turned to the praise of God and His law.

Psalm 119 is an extended meditation upon the law. Beyond the acrostic structure, its core literary design is a series of explorations of the term law or instruction, Torah, and seven key synonyms translated in the ESV as testimonies, precepts, commandments, rules, words, statutes, and promise. A few other terms, ways, paths, faithfulness, are used at a handful of points.

Verse 122 stands out as a verse without any of the synonyms or related terms. Every stanza of the Psalm contains at least six of the synonyms. The Psalm elevates the law of the Lord, much as we see in places such as Psalm 19 verses 7 to 11.

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. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The rules of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned. In keeping them there is great reward.

Such meditation upon the law of the Lord is celebrated in the opening Psalm of the book, which the blessed man ruminates upon day and night. This Psalm should be read as a wisdom Psalm, an invitation to place the law of God in the heart through memorization, meditation, insight, delight, willing obedience, and then also in song. The understanding of the law that emerges from it may surprise many who have been given to think of the law as a negative and condemning thing.

However, the new covenant is about having the law of God written on the heart and this is what Psalm 119 is all about. This is what the law was always supposed to be and this Psalm can be read as an anticipation of how the law ought to be experienced in the new covenant. This Psalm seems incredibly repetitive and redundant to many but James Mayes argues against this.

He writes, the Psalm has been called artificial and boring. Such comments are blind to the aesthetic and psychological effect of this combination of repetition and variation. The Psalm is meant to be read aloud to others or to oneself so that the repetitions guide the hearing and the variations enchant the imagination.

It establishes a focus of contemplation and evokes the mood of concentration and submission in which meditation occurs. In liturgical and devotional use, only a part of the Psalm, often one eight-line section, is read. Because of the way the parts are composed, each part can stand for the whole but the whole is needed to reach the effect of Alan Ross helpfully summarises the message of the entire Psalm as follows The first stanza of the Psalm begins with the blessedness of those walking in and keeping the law and seeking the Lord.

This is reminiscent of Psalm 1 with which the Psalter opens with its initial emphasis upon the way that someone walks in. The law needs to be kept with diligence and attentiveness. The Lord calls people to observe his commandments.

Attentiveness, watchfulness, carefulness and other such traits are thereby related to

obedience. The righteous person is a person deeply mindful of his or her way. Faithfully observing the law of the Lord, the Psalmist anticipates enjoyment of the Lord's promised blessing and deliverance.

The second stanza focuses upon the integrity and singleness of heart that meditation upon the law gives. It begins with the young man as in the book of Proverbs. Like Proverbs, this is wisdom material.

The law and the fear of the Lord with which it is faithfully received is the beginning of wisdom. The Psalmist devotes his entire self and life to God's word. This is a devotion arising out of the praise expressed at the beginning of verse 12.

He stores up God's word in his heart through memory and will not forget it. He declares God's rules with his lips. He meditates and delights upon God's testimonies within.

He fixes his eyes upon God's ways. All of this is an antidote to sin. To avoid wickedness, we need to make the law of God not merely our burden and responsibility but our delight.

This should be what Thomas Chalmers calls the expulsive power of a new affection. If we want to pursue purity, we must cultivate delight in God and his word. The third stanza presents the righteous person clinging on to God's word in a world where he is afflicted by foes and surrounded by wicked persons.

He depends upon God's gracious action and deliverance so that he can live as God's servant. He asks for opened eyes and illumination to see wondrous things out of your law. The law is a reservoir of deep and glorious mysteries.

Its greatest treasures are not scattered on the surface but require digging down. It is as we begin to see the deeper order and logic of the law that it ceases to be merely a set of seemingly arbitrary commandments and comes to be seen as the richest mine of wisdom. As a sojourner, the psalmist is dependent upon the Lord and his instruction and protection.

It is to the Lord and to his law that he turns when he is threatened by enemies. A question to consider, what would be some examples of the wondrous things that can be seen in the law of the Lord? Revelation chapter 9 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft.

Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on

their foreheads. They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone.

And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them. In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle.

On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold. Their faces were like human faces, their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lion's teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle.

They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.

The first woe has passed. Behold, two woes are still to come. Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.

So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand. I heard their number.

And this is how I saw the horses in my vision, and those who rode them. They wore breastplates the color of fire, and of sapphire, and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lion's heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.

The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues did not repent of the works of their hands, nor give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts. After the opening of the seventh seal the contents of the book can finally be revealed. To herald the revelation of the contents of the sealed book, seven trumpets are blown.

The first four trumpets bring curses upon various realms, after which there is an announcement of a series of three woes by the eagle from the trumpet blast that will follow. This takes us to the beginning of chapter nine. All of this material in Revelation, the seals and now the trumpets, is a symbolic presentation of historic events in the first century.

As the spirit descended upon the church at Pentecost, the message of the gospel spread

out, arousing opposition and causing division in both the land of Israel and the wider empire, leading to the martyrdom of Christians. This leads to judgments upon the land and its rulers and judgment upon the diaspora and wider empire. The seals followed a 4-3 pattern, beginning with four horsemen judgments announced by living creatures.

The trumpets also follow a 4-3 pattern, with three woes concluding the sequence. Also, as with the seals, there will be a delay before the sounding of the final trumpet. The blowing of the trumpets has caused a number of judgments in and from the heavens.

Hail and fire, a great mountain cast into the sea, a great star falling from heaven, judgment upon the moon, the sun and the stars. The fifth trumpet also involves a star fallen from heaven. It clearly has similarities with the third trumpet, with Wormwood, the fallen star that makes the waters bitter.

There the star could have been either a human or angelic ruler who poisoned the worship of the temple. Here the fallen star seems to more clearly be a fallen angel. Once again, the fallen star is named.

The first fallen star was Wormwood. This star is Abaddon or Apollyon. Abaddon or destruction is mentioned on several occasions in the Old Testament as a companion of Sheol or the grave.

The blowing of the fifth trumpet releases demons to ravage the land. When the spirit of the Lord leaves King Saul and comes upon David, for instance, in 1 Samuel, Saul is troubled by an evil spirit from the Lord. Jesus warns the Jews during his ministry that the evil spirit expelled from a man, the man in question being Israel, can return with several worse spirits.

As the spirit comes upon the church, Israel is troubled by demons as a sort of inverted or demonic Pentecost occurs. The temple, which is supposed to connect the earth to heaven, increasingly comes to connect it to hell. Jewish assemblies increasingly become the synagogues of Satan, described in the letters at the beginning of the book.

As Peter Lighthouse reminds us, we were told in Revelation chapter 1 verse 18 that Jesus has the keys of death and Hades. The fact that the fallen star has the key to the bottomless pit must be because Jesus has granted it to him. This is also perhaps comparable to the casting out of the demons out of the Gerosene demoniac into the herd of pigs.

We might also hear here allusions to at least three of the plagues upon Egypt. There is the darkening of the heavens, the opening of the bottomless pit and the smoke emerging from it is like the sixth plague in Exodus chapter 9 verses 8 to 10 with the bottomless pit represented by the kiln and the smoke with its soot. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, take handfuls of soot from the kiln and let Moses throw them in the air

in the sight of Pharaoh.

It shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt and become boils breaking out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt. So they took soot from the kiln and stood before Pharaoh and Moses threw it in the air and it became boils breaking out in sores on man and beast. The scorpion locusts are also more obviously like the eighth plague of locusts in Exodus chapter 10 verses 3 to 6. So Moses and Aaron went into Pharaoh and said to him, thus says the Lord the God of the Hebrews, how long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go that they may serve me.

For if you refuse to let my people go, behold tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country and they shall cover the face of the land so that no one can see the land. And they shall eat what is left to you after the hail and they shall eat every tree of yours that grows in the field and they shall fill your houses and the houses of all your servants and of all the Egyptians as neither your fathers nor your grandfathers have seen from the day they came on earth to this day. Then he turned and went out from Pharaoh.

At various points we have also observed loose associations between the days of creation and the corresponding seal or trumpet. Locusts and swarming things are associated with the fifth day and here come with the fifth trumpet. The scorpion locusts form a devouring demonic cloud much as the cherubim are within and help to form the glory cloud of Ezekiel chapter 1. The scorpion locusts are a demonic parody of this.

The description of the sound that they make for instance should remind us of Ezekiel chapter 1 verse 24 and the description of the cherubim in the glory cloud. And when they went I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters like the sound of the almighty a sound of tumult like the sound of an army when they stood still they let down their wings. As composite creatures they also parody cherubim.

They bring together leonine equine human and aquiline features. Scorpions are like serpents especially associated with satan and his demonic hordes. These locust scorpions while being like a destroying cloud of locusts are not powerful through their devouring of crops but more through their demonic stings.

Behind this passage we might also hear echoes of Jesus' statement to his disciples in Luke chapter 10 verses 18 to 20. And he said to them I saw satan fall like lightning from heaven behold I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy and nothing shall hurt you nevertheless do not rejoice in this that the spirits are subject to you but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. The demonic star then falls from the heavens producing demonic swarms upon the earth but those whose names are written in heaven those sealed on their foreheads are not vulnerable to their ravaging.

Lighthart also notes possible parallels with the fallen star of Isaiah chapter 14 where

the fall of the day star is followed by the plague of a flying fiery serpent. In verse 29 rejoice not O Philistia all of you that the rod that struck you is broken for from the serpent's root will come forth an adder and its fruit will be a flying fiery serpent. The description of the scorpion locusts is perhaps a little perplexing.

There are a number of things that we can observe about the description that might help. First the head to tail description of their appearance is what is called a wasif such as we have of Jesus earlier in the book and we also have of the figures in the song of songs. David Chilton who generally looks for direct correspondences with events in the Jewish war sees a possible reference to the zealots quoting Josephus's account of the Jewish war book 4 chapter 9. With their insatiable hunger for loot they ransacked the houses of the wealthy, murdered men and violated women for sport.

They drank their spoils with blood and from mere satiety they shamelessly gave themselves up to effeminate practices, plaiting their hair and putting on women's clothes, drenching themselves with perfumes and painting their eyelids to make themselves attractive. They copied not merely the dress but also the passions of women, devising in their excess of licentiousness unlawful pleasures in which they wallowed as in a brothel. Thus they entirely polluted the city with their foul practices, yet though they wore women's faces their hands were murderous.

They would approach with mincing steps, then suddenly become fighting men and whipping out their swords from under their cloaks. They would run through every passerby. The sort of hellish violence released in the madness of the zealots certainly recalls the description of the scorpion locust in a number of respects, from the women's hair and appearance to the hidden sword under the cloak like a scorpion sting.

Perhaps we are to think of the related madness of people like Saul prior to his conversion, murderers and assassins raised up against the church that ultimately led to Israel's demise. The description of the scorpion locust is drawn in large measure from Joel 2, a passage that the apostle Peter quotes at length on the day of Pentecost. Within that passage the Lord sends an army of locusts against his people and their land.

Joel 1.6 For a nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number. Its teeth are lion's teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness. Joel 2.1-11 Blow a trumpet in Zion, sound an alarm on my holy mountain.

Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness. Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people.

Their like has never been before, nor will again after them, through all the years of all generations. Fire devours before them, and behind them a flame burns. The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but behind them a desolate wilderness, and nothing

escapes them.

Their appearance is like the appearance of horses, and like warhorses they run. As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle. Before them peoples are in anguish, all faces grow pale.

Like warriors they charge, like soldiers they scale the wall. They march each on his way, they do not swerve from their paths, they do not jostle one another. Each marches in his path, they burst through the weapons and are not halted.

They leap upon the city, they run upon the walls, they climb up into the houses, they enter through the windows like a thief. The earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble, the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining. The Lord utters his voice before the army, for his camp is exceedingly great.

He who executes his word is powerful, for the day of the Lord is great and very awesome. Who can endure it? The five months might refer to the symbolic period between Pentecost and the Day of Atonement. The five months here are also in the fifth trumpet.

Austin Farrer notes a possible connection between the description of the scorpion locus and the signs of the zodiac. This would suggest a connection between the battle that's taking place on the earth and a battle in the heavens. Lighthouse describes an elaboration of this thesis in his commentary.

Their lion teeth and feminine hair suggests another connection. The constellations in the zodiac move from Leo to Virgo to Libra to Scorpio to Sagittarius, from the lion at the beginning to a woman through Scorpio and Sagittarius. That is the sequence of John's description of the Leucorpians.

They constitute not just a single but a series of constellations. The cash value is that these constellations stretch out over about five months of the year, the same period when the Leucorpians torment those they sting. The sixth angel blows his trumpet, initiating the next judgment, with a new set of composite creatures coming on the scene.

The golden altar was, in the preceding chapter, the place from which the angel offered incense with the prayers of the saints before the throne. The site of the command to release the angels here might relate their release with those prayers. These creatures are described in ways that recall the scorpion locus, but their identity has yet to be determined.

They are matched to the scorpion locus in many of their features. The character of this army of fire-breathing lion horses with serpents for tails needs to be determined though. They differ from the scorpion locus in their origin.

They are not brought up from the abyss by a fallen angel, but are four angels prepared for that time, released by the sixth trumpet-blowing angel. The number of them might remind us of the numbering of the servants of the Lord in Daniel chapter 7 verse 10. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him.

A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. Further clues are found in parallels between the army here and the two witnesses in chapter 11 verses 3 to 6. Their power is the power of the word.

There are two of them, corresponding to the doubling of the ten thousand times ten thousand servants of the Lord from Daniel. They are, I believe, an opposing army to the scorpion locust, but both armies will afflict the land in different ways. The angels are at the river Euphrates, which is the furthest border of the land at its greatest extent.

There are four of them, associated with the four corners of the land. We've already seen four angels at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth at the beginning of Revelation chapter 7, during the sixth seal. Now, in the corresponding trumpet, four angels who have been held back are also mentioned.

The specification of the hour, the day, the month and the year might recall Passover. The hour, the day, the month and the year are all specified in Exodus chapter 12, verses 29 and 41. The sealing of the 144,000 on their foreheads also recalled Passover.

The horses, once again, are likely the church, ridden by the angels of the spirit. In developing this point, Lighthouse notes the way that Elijah and Elisha are spoken of as the chariots of Israel and its horsemen. They wear fire, sapphire and sulfur, and they speak fire, smoke and sulfur.

God placed tongues of flame upon his servants at Pentecost, and thereafter they were to speak with fiery tongues. Perhaps the power of their mouths is to be contrasted with the scorpion locusts, who, despite their lion's teeth, lack power in their mouths. The speech of the church, by contrast, is powerful by means of the fire of the prophetic spirit.

Like Elisha in 2 Kings chapter 6, the church is also accompanied by myriads of angels, with horses and chariots of fire. These kill a third of mankind. The people killed here are people within the land of Israel, and what killing here means is not entirely clear.

Are they converted, or is destruction or judgment brought down upon them? Perhaps both are in view. We should remember that the scorpion locusts were causing people to long for death, and now people are given death. These creatures have power in their mouths, but can also poison with their tails.

However, the people of the land fail to repent of their sins, idolatry especially. Perhaps the idolatry being focused upon the temple, which is increasingly being treated as an

alternative object of the people's loyalty to God himself. It's also being treated as a place in which people can take refuge from dealing with their sins, like a den of thieves.

Beyond their idolatry, they also fail to repent of their murders, sorceries, sexual immorality and theft. A question to consider, where might we see background for this passage in the Book of Acts?