

More Insight Than All My Teachers?

By Dr. J. Smith

*I have more insight than all my teachers,
for I meditate on your statutes. (Ps 119:99)*

As you know, the motto of our seminary is taken from Psalm 119:105: *Your Word is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path.* It's a beautiful text, and it has even become the foundation for our M.Div. Program Outcomes: we want to train students to "understand the Word, communicate the Word, and radiate the Word." This verse reminds us that that God's Word is not just something for our heads and our hearts but also for our feet. We are not just students in the study but pilgrims on the road. I do not know how this verse came to be our motto. Psalm 119 has a lot of verses to choose from. Verse 99, for instance—imagine if that were the motto of the seminary: *I have more insight than all my teachers.* Hmm, a bit awkward!

On Orientation Day this past September, I was asked to lead opening devotions at lunchtime, so on the spur of the moment I decided to read Ps 119:105, starting a few verses earlier at verse 97. I must confess that I had misgivings when I got to verse 99—maybe this wasn't the best choice for the occasion. Not the sort of verse that would resonate with a student on the first day of class! Then again, it's probably not a verse a student would pick for a final chapel message either. Nor is it the kind of verse that gets read out when you walk across the stage at Convocation. And really, would you quote it to your examiner in a classis exam? Would you preach it for your inaugural sermon? It's hard to think of *any* situation where a student would want to say such a thing about himself in comparison with his teachers (though maybe at bowling this afternoon when you beat the profs!).

I have more insight than all my teachers – would you agree that it sounds a wee bit boastful? It even seems to contradict what Jesus said in Matthew 10: *A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher and the servant like his master.* Still, the psalmist dared to say it, so I guess we should aspire to say it too, in the spirit of the psalmist. So what did he mean? Notice that this verse is between two others with similar sentiments. Verse 98 says, *Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me.* In many respects the psalmist is at the mercy of his enemies: they persecute him, they slander him, they cause him suffering, so that he cries out to God for help. But in one respect the psalmist is superior to them: he has more wisdom than they, because he has internalized the very wisdom of God expressed in his commandments. These commands have become so much a part of him that they are always with him. He has hidden God's word in his heart. Verse 100 says, *I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.* In other words, the gauge of understanding is obedience. He continues in verses 101 and 102, *I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word. I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me.* Now verse 102 uses a different word for "teach" than verse 99 does: in verse 102 the verb is *yarah*, related to the word *torah*, while verse 99 uses the verb *lamad*, the more general word for instruction. But we should not make too much of this difference: six times in Psalm 119 the psalmist asks God to teach him, using the same verb as in verse 99, the verb *lamad*. So the point is not that God is a

different kind of teacher, but that the psalmist has learned so much more from God than from his human teachers, so that he has gained more insight than they.

How is that so? It's not easy to get a clear sense of the psalmist's reasoning. Psalm 119 does not flow logically from beginning to end but is filled with repetitions and variations on the same thoughts in no particular order. One explainer said it would flow just as well if you started with the last verse and read it from the end to the beginning. Maybe that's true. Still, when you read the whole psalm, there is a general picture that emerges. First, the psalmist professes to have a great love and devotion for the law of the Lord. Second, the psalmist acknowledges that this was not always the case. Verse 67: *before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.* Verse 71: *it was good for me to be afflicted, so that I might obey your decrees.* Third, the psalmist is being afflicted at the hands of persecutors who have no use for God's law—wicked people who lie in wait for him and slander him. Through this experience of affliction, the psalmist has learned to treasure God's law. Obedience to God's law has become the most important thing in his life. The more the wicked oppress him, the more he resolves to live by God's law, uncompromisingly. Fourth, at the time of writing, the psalmist has not yet been delivered, so on the one hand he praises God for his wonderful law, and on the other hand he prays earnestly for deliverance. In short, through his experience of affliction the psalmist has learned something that his human teachers could not teach him: he has learned obedience through what he suffered. That makes us think of Jesus Christ; it's what the letter to the Hebrews says about him (Heb 5:8).

I can think of three lines to Christ from verse 99. The first is a line from the *psalmist* to Christ. When he was twelve years old, Jesus' parents

found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers (Lk 2:47). Already then he had outstanding wisdom. Then Luke continues that he went home with his parents and was obedient to them, and that he grew in wisdom. After his baptism Jesus faced a far greater enemy than the psalmist did, and he overcame him by quoting from God's law. Throughout his earthly ministry the teachers of the law opposed him, challenged him, and accused him of breaking the law, but time and again the crowds were amazed at Jesus' answers. Not only was he wiser than all the teachers; but he also proved himself obedient, not just to the requirements of the law but to the will of his Father. Like the psalmist he entrusted himself to God, but unlike the psalmist he did not pray to be saved, but he prayed for the will to offer himself for the salvation of others. He learned obedience through suffering, and he suffered to the death.

The second line is from the *law* to Christ. Commentators often mention that although Psalm 119 refers repeatedly to the law, the precepts, the statutes, the commandments, and the testimonies, it never alludes to particular laws, and it never mentions Moses. Instead the law has become a concept, a totality, almost an ideal, a *raison d'être*. Much as the psalmist had internalized and appropriated the law, even he with his exemplary obedience and devotion was not a picture of perfect obedience, the embodiment of the law's beauty. He was still a sinner; he still needed to be saved. But Jesus fulfilled the law, and insofar as the law of Psalm 119 is a totality, Christ in his person has become its personification: in the life he lived and the death he died, in his heavenly high priesthood and kingship and in the blessing, peace, and hope he brings into our lives, he is the very embodiment of God's law. We who are in Christ

can also become wiser than the teachers of the law, because when *we* meditate on the law we find our Saviour there.

The third line is from the *God* of Psalm 119 to Jesus Christ. To the best of our knowledge the psalmist did not meet God in person, nor did he hear God speak with an audible voice. Rather he knew God from the Scriptures, and he communicated with God by meditating on his Word and calling to him for help. So it is with us: we've not yet had the privilege of seeing our Saviour face to face, but we recognize his voice in the Scriptures as he calls us to trust in his saving work and to follow in his footsteps, also through times of affliction. Psalm 119 is about the happiness that comes through knowing and obeying God and persevering in times of affliction. When I read verse 99, I think of the apostle Paul, trained in the law at the feet of Gamaliel (the best education a man could get!), and what did he become? A persecutor of the saints! And he thought he was pretty righteous. But then Christ took hold of him, and through affliction Christ taught Paul in a way that Gamaliel never could, and the apostle far surpassed his teacher. Says Paul, *Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything as loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead* (Phil 3:7–11).

I'm not going to suggest that we change the motto of CRTS to verse 99, but I will say this:

your education here, valuable as it may be, cannot take the place of personal meditation on the Word. God will use especially the difficult times in your life to drive you to the Scriptures and to Christ in a way that your professors never could. That's a good reminder for me as a prof. I can do my best to teach you the Hebrew language, responsible text-critical methods, reading competence, hermeneutical strategies, and the content and context of the Bible, and I can suggest how it all points to Christ, but all of that cannot take the place of your own personal meditation. Nor can I presume that I know and obey God better than any of you do. When it comes to knowing God deeply and personally, loving and trusting him, appropriating, internalizing, and applying his revelation to your lives, it may very well be that any or all of you make more progress than I do, this side of glory. In any case, at the end of the day, your knowledge of God will not be a reflection of how well *we* have taught you but of how well *God* has taught you—through us as professors yes, but perhaps even more through the afflictions by which he drives you to his Word and teaches you really, truly, and personally to find there all the contours of the Lord Jesus Christ.



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