

# Bible Sunday

## Sermon on Psalm 119.129-136 (ESV)

### Sermon

- <sup>129</sup> Your testimonies are wonderful;  
therefore my soul keeps them.
- <sup>130</sup> The unfolding of your words gives light;  
it imparts understanding to the simple.
- <sup>131</sup> I open my mouth and pant,  
because I long for your commandments.
- <sup>132</sup> Turn to me and be gracious to me,  
as is your way with those who love your name.
- <sup>133</sup> Keep steady my steps according to your promise,  
and let no iniquity get dominion over me.
- <sup>134</sup> Redeem me from man's oppression,  
that I may keep your precepts.
- <sup>135</sup> Make your face shine upon your servant,  
and teach me your statutes.
- <sup>136</sup> My eyes shed streams of tears,  
because people do not keep your law.

### English Standard Version (ESV)

How many Bibles do you have at home? I have almost too many to count! Different translations, formats, sizes... Even if you're someone relatively new to faith, chances are you have a Bible or two. In addition, nowadays there's always the internet – it takes seconds to look up a Bible verse, and you probably have a Bible app on your smartphone. There's no need to lug around a big, bulky book and you can read it anytime, anywhere. We have easier access to God's word than ever before. And yet, do we realise what a treasure we have?

After all, it's as we read God's word that we encounter him, the creator and saviour of the world. So how do we respond to God when we read the Bible? How do we treasure God and his word? That's the key question to ask ourselves as we read the passage from Psalm 119.

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible and it's a celebration of the rest of the book. Throughout the psalm, the unnamed author reflects on the reliability and sufficiency of God's word, whatever circumstances and seasons we might face in life. Almost every verse refers back to the Scriptures in some way. For example, in the passage we're looking at alone, it's referred to as his 'testimonies', 'words', 'commandments', 'promise', 'precepts', 'statutes' and 'law'. Each of these words displays a different shade of meaning and reveals the richness of the way God relates to us. Throughout the psalm we are constantly drawn back to the truth and power of what God has said, and, behind the words, the faithfulness of God himself.

The great Baptist preacher, CH Spurgeon, waxed lyrical about this psalm. 'The more one studies it the fresher it becomes,' he claimed. 'It contains no idle word; the grapes of this cluster are almost to bursting full with the new wine of the kingdom.' And it 'contains within its depths an ocean of fire, and those who devoutly gaze into it shall not only see the brightness, but feel the glow of the sacred flame'. Unsurprisingly he also said, 'We might do well to commit it to memory.'<sup>1</sup>

Even if we only drop into one of its 22 stanzas – which each begin with a different one of the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet – what strikes us, as Spurgeon saw, is that this is a psalm full of deep feeling. God’s word is not dry or dusty, as our culture would often have it.

Let’s read the passage and taste that passion and excitement for Scripture and for God ourselves:

[READ THE PASSAGE – PSALM 119.129-136]

[You may want to pause briefly after reading the passage to let the words sink in.]

We’re going to break down the passage into sections and look more closely at the psalmist’s delight in the word of God, his desire to learn how to please God, his determination to keep to God’s ways and finally the distress he experiences when people ignore God’s laws.

- **Delight (verses 129-130)**
- **Desire (verse 131)**
- **Determination (verses 132-135)**
- **Distress (verse 136)**

### **Delight (verses 129-130)**

These verses speak of something immensely pleasing to both our minds and our souls. The psalmist expresses his delight in God’s ‘testimonies’ – the truths he finds in God’s word and the evidence of God’s sovereignty and loving, just, righteous and merciful character. When he says, ‘my soul keeps them’ we get a sense of him treasuring God’s testimonies for eternity.

Then he marvels at how ‘the unfolding’ of God’s words ‘gives light’ and ‘understanding’. That phrase, ‘the unfolding of your words,’ suggests active involvement, the seeking of understanding from God. Perhaps you remember being captured by the explanatory power of the Bible. Suddenly, your life experience and the world around you made sense in a way it never had before. As CS Lewis wrote, ‘I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else.’<sup>2</sup> That understanding comes from God’s revelation of himself, supremely in the person of Jesus but revealed in the Bible’s testimony.

### **Desire (verse 131)**

Because God’s word is so good, the psalmist experiences an intense hunger for his commandments. He longs for God’s instruction, to be directed by him. We don’t love the Bible as a book for its own sake – it’s because in reading and following it we are able to encounter God himself. And the reason for wanting to do that is ultimately to please God. The psalmist longs to know how to please and glorify God in his life. That zeal ought to be a challenge to us. Do we approach the word of God with the same desire?

*[‘When I first started reading the Bible for myself, I couldn’t put it down. I went to university to study maths, but it could fairly be said that my passion quickly became studying the Bible. I had been taken to church from birth, rarely missing a Sunday, so I had heard the Bible read in services every week. However, I experienced something different as I read for myself. I found it much easier to hear God speaking directly to me – perhaps because I was reading the Bible in the context of my ordinary, everyday life – and I was also getting a broader appreciation for God’s message to us, because I was reading larger sections of his word rather than hearing passages in isolation from their context. So much fell into place that had previously felt obscure or irrelevant to me.’ This is Paul Harcourt’s testimony – please add your own here.]*

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<sup>1</sup>CH Spurgeon, ‘Psalm 119 On the Whole Psalm’ [www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/spurgeon\\_charles/tod/ps119\\_00.cfm](http://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/spurgeon_charles/tod/ps119_00.cfm).

<sup>2</sup>CS Lewis, ‘Is Theology Poetry?’

## Determination (verses 132-135)

In verses 132-135 the psalmist shows his determination to put the desire to keep God's commands and please him into practice. Straight away, he recognises that he needs God's help to do this. He can see all the stumbling blocks and difficulties he might encounter. But rather than losing hope, he displays his understanding of God's sovereignty and his loving and forgiving character as he calls on God to turn to him and 'be gracious', to keep steady his steps and to 'let no iniquity get dominion' over him.

He calls on God to 'redeem' him from 'man's oppression' not just because it's unpleasant to be oppressed but so that he will be free to keep God's precepts above those of people. Precepts are rules that regulate our thoughts and behaviour. Applying this to ourselves presents a real challenge. Are we determined that our thoughts and behaviour will be regulated by what God says is good over and above the current values of our society?

In verse 135 the psalmist describes himself as God's 'servant' and appeals to God himself, 'teach me your statutes.' How humble and teachable are we as we approach God's word, and do we ask for his help to learn of and keep to his ways?

## Distress (verse 136)

Perhaps verse 136 seems a strange way to end this reflection. In our society, being seen as tolerant of everyone and everything is so highly valued that we often recoil from appearing to impose our views on others – or even suggesting that what we've discovered is better. The last thing we want is to come across as superior or critical. But when we read the psalmist's words, 'my eyes shed streams of tears', we don't get a sense of anger arising from a judgemental spirit, but rather anguish over the state of people who are living in ignorance of what we've found. People who don't know God's ways hurt themselves and others. The psalmist sheds 'streams of tears, because people do not keep' God's law. If we have a clear view of God as our Lord and saviour, we should sorrow over the many people who don't know God or his ways. The question is, how will our distress motivate us to act? How can we help people to come to know God? If you've found something good, the loving thing to do is to make others aware of it and pray that their eyes will be opened as well.

There are people all across the world who, for a variety of reasons, do not have access to the word of God. Perhaps they live in a place where the Bible is banned and Christians are persecuted. Perhaps there's no translation of the Bible in their language yet, or perhaps poverty makes owning a Bible an expensive and unattainable luxury. There are many moving testimonies of people who have given everything to have the scriptures in their own language or to make them available to others.

Let me share with you the story of Tadala, a young girl from a poor township in Malawi. She always went to Sunday school but there were only a few Bibles to share between 130 children. Her family couldn't afford a Bible, let alone one aimed at children, so she struggled to understand the teaching at church. That is until, thanks to Bible Society supporters, Tadala was given a children's Bible. Today, Tadala loves reading Bible stories to her family and sharing the good news of Jesus with them. She says, 'Now, I really understand what it means to know Jesus. The Bible tells me Jesus is with me.'

If you are interested in knowing more about what it's like to support Christians like Tadala through Bible Society, do have a chat with me after the service. *[This last sentence is optional depending on whether you are having an offering or want to encourage people to support Bible Society personally.]*

Isn't it inspiring to hear of Tadala's desire to know Jesus and share the good news about him from the Bible? If, as we search our hearts, we find little there but apathy, then we're missing out. Maybe it's time to ask God to help us become more like the psalmist, treasuring God and his word – keeping his testimonies in our souls. Let's ask God to increase our delight in him and his word. Let's ask God to increase our desire and determination to keep his commandments and please him. Finally, let's ask God to increase our compassion for the lost, those who don't know or acknowledge the Lord our God, and to help us to live as effective witnesses for him.

## About the author

Paul Harcourt studied theology at the University of Oxford and is now New Wine's National Leader and vicar at All Saints Woodford Wells. He and his wife Becky have two children, the eldest of whom has special needs. Under Paul's leadership, All Saints has developed into a network of four churches, with All Saints acting as a resource church for the region. Paul has written two books about following Jesus into the Spirit-filled life - *Growing in Circles* (River Publishing 2016) and, with Becky, *Walking on Water* (River Publishing 2017).

## Notes Format

Reading - Psalm 119:129-136 (ESV)

Introduction – How many Bibles do you have? Do we treasure God and his word?

Context – Reliability and sufficiency of God's word / the truth and power of what God has said and the faithfulness of God himself.

Teaching – based on 4 points

- **Delight (verses 129-130)** - That faith comes from God's revelation of himself, supremely in the person of Jesus, but definitely revealed in the Bible's testimony
- **Desire (verse 131)** – The desire to know God's commandments so that we can keep them and, in doing so, please and glorify God.
- **Determination (verses 132-135)** – We need God's help to put our determination to keep to his ways into practice.
- **Distress (verse 136)** – Sorrow and anguish when people do not respond to God appropriately. What should this distress motivate us to do?

**Bible Society Story – Tadala in Malawi:**

[biblesociety.org.uk/latest/news/the-girl-whose-name-means-blessed/](https://biblesociety.org.uk/latest/news/the-girl-whose-name-means-blessed/)

## Application

Asking God to make us more like the psalmist – to increase our delight in God and his word, to increase our desire and determination to keep to his ways and to increase our distress for the lost for the sake of his name.

