

THE ALPHABET OF LIBERTY
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Psalm 119:97-104

If you're in a hurry today, I've got some bad news: The scripture today is Psalm 119. The reason it's bad news is that Psalm 119 is long, over five pages in this pulpit Bible. It is, in fact, the longest chapter in the Bible. Fortunately, though, the lectionary directs us to just one section of the Psalm, and we're looking at that.

Psalm 119 is a celebration of the law of God. "Law" may not be the right word. It is the "walk" of God, the "guidance" of God. And this long psalm goes over and over it. "How I love your law . . . your commandments make me wise . . . your decrees are my meditation . . . I do not turn away from your ordinances. . . through your precepts I gain understanding." One line after another, 176 lines in all, celebrate the law.

It is, shall we say, somewhat repetitious. It seems to say the same thing over and over. Some modern commentators, in fact, have called Psalm 119 downright boring. Here is the German scholar Artur Weiser: "The form stifles the subject matter. The thoughts are repeated in wearisome fashion."¹

Well, maybe for us. But I bet this psalm would not have seemed boring or wearisome to the original readers and hearers. They would have delighted in this great psalm. They would have delighted, because this psalm celebrates one of the greatest invention of humankind—the alphabet.

Psalm 119 is organized according to the Hebrew alphabet, which has 22 letters, not 26 like our English alphabet. The psalm has 22 stanzas, each with eight lines, and each one based on the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In fact, each line of a given stanza begins with the same Hebrew letter. The first stanza, for instance, begins with *aleph*, the Hebrew "A." Each of the

¹ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1962), p.739.

first eight lines begins with an *aleph*. The verses we read are the *mem* stanza, sort of like our letter M. In Hebrew, each line of the scripture we read begins with the letter *mem*.

You can't tell any of this when you read the English translation. The power of this alphabet times eight is lost on us. But those who first read and heard this psalm would have marveled at the way it celebrates the alphabet as God's great gift.

When people first started writing, they didn't have an alphabet. They would scratch a stick in the dust, and draw pictures. If you wanted to write about a tree, you drew a little tree. Or a giraffe, you drew that.

There were a couple of problems with this picture writing. One was that some words can't be shown as pictures very well. How do you picture "liberty," for instance, or "faith"? The other problem was that a written language like that took a lot of pictures. One new symbol for each idea. After awhile you've got thousands of pictures that you've got to remember.

There is a Chinese dialect today that has over forty thousand characters. That's a lot of characters to keep straight in your head.

So, somewhere along the way, people got the idea of writing an alphabet, where each letter represented more or less a different sound that we make with our mouths. One of the earliest alphabets had 87 letters, which is still a lot of letters to master. The only people who could keep track of 87 letters were the educated class—the scholars and priests. If it is true that "knowledge is power," then these educated ones who could keep track of 87 letters had a lot of power. All the others were illiterate and were under the power of those who had the knowledge.

You see, an alphabet with 87 characters is going to be hierarchical: Some will have the knowledge and the power and they'll be on top. Others will be ignorant and be on bottom.

But then some group came up with a simpler alphabet, just 22 letters. It may have been the Phoenicians, or it may have been a group that lived in the region north of Sinai, that is called in some documents the Aipiru, that is, the Hebrews. It just might have been the people of Israel who first invented this simpler alphabet.

Twenty-two letters still requires some study to learn, just like our alphabet of 26 letters does. That's why you go to school, to learn to take those letters and understand them and learn to read. Not every can master the old system with 87 letters, but anyone with the right teacher and the right desire could master 22. No longer would the society have a powerful educated class on top and all the illiterates on the bottom. Now it was possible for everyone to learn to read. Power

would be shared by all people, not in a hierarchy, but in a system where everyone was equal. It was an enormous step toward equality.²

That, by the way, why Presbyterians have always valued education for all people. Knowledge is power, and unless we're going to return to a world where some have the knowledge and the power on top, and the others are illiterate on bottom, we're going to have to have schools where education and knowledge and power is available to all and shared by all.

And so the first readers and writers delighted in Psalm 119, that was constructed according to the alphabet. Actually, this 22-letter alphabet was not all that old when Psalm 119 was written. It was still new enough that people realized what a wonderful invention the alphabet was, and is. They marveled at what we mostly take for granted. You can express the world in 22 Hebrew letters, or 26 English ones. Think what you can express in 26 letters:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

“They are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

“Row, row, row your boat.”

“How 'bout them Vols.”

“The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.”

“I love you.”

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

I have a friend who tells about her child who has started kindergarten this year. One of the things they are doing is focusing on a different letter of the alphabet each week. Right now they're on C. They're supposed to find things that start with the letter C. And the child delights in finding them: cat, cake, car, closet. How many things, with just one letter!

Isn't it fantastic? The entire universe, all of reality, and you can express it in 26 letters. No wonder the Hebrews delighted in their wonderful invention of the alphabet.

The writer of Psalm 119 is not just celebrating the alphabet, however. The writer is using the alphabet to celebrate something even greater: the law of God, God's Torah, God's guidance. Life under the guidance and direction of God is the best there is. Life under God's Torah guides every part of life, A to Z. “Torah applies to everything.”³ Do you want to choose the best and highest life? Then choose the one thing that guides all of life—choose the way of God.

² This whole discussion from Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 130-133.

³ James Luther Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 131.

That may be a more important message for us today than it was for the original hearers of this psalm. If there is anything that characterizes our age, it is choice: choice in your cereals, choice in your cell phone plan. Henry Ford once said that you could have your Model T in any color that you wanted, as long as it was black. But now you have your choice of color, and a thousand other options, too.

Those of you who were here last spring when Bruce Whearty spoke may remember his telling about coming back to this country after serving as a missionary in the south Pacific. He walked into a CVS or someplace to get a tube of toothpaste. But what he found were toothpastes for whitening, and others for your breath, and others that eliminated plaque, and don't get that Polygrip because it keeps your false teeth in place. He was brought almost to the point of paralysis by too many choices.

The writer of Psalm 119 says that in a world of too many choices, where you can go this way and that way, there is one choice that gives life. There are not five ways or three ways or two ways. There is one way, and you find it or you perish. It is the single way of following the way of God, the law of God, the Torah of God. You cover all the bases: A-B-C . . . And it gives guidance to all your life.

Jesus says much the same. Jesus calls us to that single-minded pursuit of his way. You can't put your hand to the plow and then look back. You can't sorta try it, but hold a little back in case a better deal comes along. You commit yourself, totally, A to Z, to the way of God and God's Christ.

"Your law is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces." (v. 72)

"Put false ways far from me, and graciously teach me your law." (v. 29)

"Turn my eyes from vanities, give me life in your ways." (v. 37)

We live in a world where we've got all kinds of choices about the sort of lives we will lead. This way, that way. The writer of Psalm 119 chooses the good way, God's way. It's not a burden, not a prison. "I shall walk at liberty, for I have sought your precepts." (v. 45)

That's how we do it. We choose the way of the Lord. One day at a time, one letter at a time: A-B-C. It is the alphabet that spells liberty. †