

Title: Review one of the following – Ash, Christopher. *Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God: Psalm 119 for the Bible Teacher and Bible Hearer.* Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2008.

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DECLARATION

I certify that this ASSIGNMENT is my own work. I have acknowledged all material and sources used in it, and that I have not plagiarised in part or whole the work of others without stating the references.

The subtitle of Ash's book, *Heartbeat of the Word of God*, is eminently suitable to describe his intentions in expositing Psalm 119. Throughout his study, he iterates and reiterates the main thrust of this long passage of Scripture – that the reader or hearer find delight and visceral enjoyment in the contents of their Bible. Not merely as intellectual curiosity or grudging chore to be dutifully completed, but a thrill that infuses every waking hour of our daily life. (I am reminded of William Lazareth's very German depiction of Luther's faith – sausage and beer and flute and family, "all to the greater glory of God"¹.)

Ash sets up the individual chapters of his book along the naturally-occurring divisions of the Psalm – in the original language, it is an acrostic in which each set of eight verses begins with one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. As another reviewer has noted, this lends itself to consuming Ash's book piecemeal or on a daily reading schedule ².

Ash's mastery of the language is evident as he delves into the rich, multivarious meanings of key Hebrew words that are sometimes lost in translation (indeed, he has no shyness about criticizing shortcomings in various English translations of the Psalm). Often, he provides his own preferred English wordings, cross-referencing to other parts of the same Psalm or different passages in order to demonstrate the fuller meanings of those words.

In particular, he brings out a deeper meaning of the word *chesed* which is often translated 'steadfast love' but which he describes rather as 'steady unbreakable Covenant love'. It is no mere affection prone to whimsy or mood – it is the guaranteed, unbreakable promise of God to uphold His side of 'believing loyalty'³ (which is a similar translation of *chesed* favoured by another scholar of Hebrew and the Old Testament⁴). We are assured by the same unstayed Sovereign hand which brought the Israelites out of bondage into the Promised Land, the same firm voice that reassured Elijah that he was not alone in remaining faithful. This belief in, reliance upon and even desperate appeal to God's *chesed* is what gives the believer hope amidst the unending troubles of this world.

For the overarching theme of the Psalm that Ash brings out is what he terms 'The Adversity Gospel' – God afflicts us as a much-needed reminder that we are mere sojourners on this fallen, fleeting mortal coil. Woe betide us if we grow so comfortable during our worldly pit stop that we forget about our heavenly destination! Suffering acts like a "megaphone to rouse a deaf world"⁵, warning us that the tempting fruits of godless living are poison at their core. It is toward the future promise – backstopped by the very Creator of the universe! – that we should look toward.

Ash is careful to clarify that God does not willingly afflict us out of some morbid sadism, or that affliction in and of itself is good; rather, trials are needed to shape and refine us for the coming Kingdom. They teach us eternal truths via temporal object lessons; as one theologian has put it: "you and I will not take suffering-free states of affairs for granted because we have genuinely learned from our experiences"⁶.

What after all is a few years, or decades, or even a lifetime of hardship compared to the vastness of eternity that awaits? We have assurance in God's own word; trust in it and witness "the

¹ Barry Stephenson, *Performing the Reformation: Religious Festivals in Contemporary Wittenberg* (NY/USA: Oxford University Press Inc, 2010), 192.

² Anna Moss, "Christmas gift for encouraging Christian friends and family: Bible Delight by Christopher Ash", *Equip Book Club* (accessed 10-May-2021): <https://www.equip.org.au/bookclubfeed/2011/06/bible-delight-1.html-4gywm>

³ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham/USA: Lexham Press, 2015), 164,170.

⁴ Michael S. Heiser, "Naked Bible 350: Loving Loyalty and Believing Loyalty", *The Naked Bible Podcast* (accessed 10-May-2021): <https://nakedbiblepodcast.com/podcast/naked-bible-350-loving-loyalty-and-believing-loyalty/>

⁵ C.S. Lewis, "The Problem of Pain", *Project Gutenberg Canada* (accessed 10-May-2021): <https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/lewiscs-problemofpain/lewiscs-problemofpain-00-h.html#chapter06> [81].

⁶ Tim Stratton, "3 Circles & ALL the Problems of Evil", *Free Thinking Ministries* (accessed 10-May-2021): <https://freethinkingministries.com/3-circles-all-the-problems-of-evil/>

reality of *eternal life* change the “problem of evil”⁷. The Adversity Gospel is the polar opposite of The Prosperity Gospel that (emptily) promises wealth and happiness in this lifetime – a false hope that risks wrecking the un-sturdy faith of its adherents when the storms of strife assail it. (In fact, I was surprised that Ash did not include Hebrews 12:6 somewhere; I hope I did not overlook his mention of it.)

Yet in the midst of the toils and snares that the unrighteous spitefully set for believers, God’s word – His precepts and moral guidance – illuminate the pathway and bring our focus back to the eternity that really matters. This is the heartbeat and delight that Ash wants to communicate to his readers. It is no mere head wisdom but the very real application of God’s word, the living out of it 24/7. Ash often uses anecdotes from his memory or everyday life to illustrate the points he is making to that effect – and to encourage the reader that we are not the first or only person to tread the harrowing path.

In reading the Psalm itself and Ash’s accompanying insights, I admit that it is a struggle personally to make the aspiration a reality. The Psalm does not merely beckon the reader to be touched by God’s word as if through some automatic reaction. In fact, it is likely this will not naturally occur – stained and skewed by sin as we are. Rather, we are invited to *learn* how to appreciate and adore God’s word. To use Ash’s description, it is an acquired taste – one that has to be intentionally acquired at the starting stages. Our emotions should not be left to their own natural course, but instead be shaped, conformed, moulded into what they *should* be – once again, sanctification.

Imperfect as we are, we are bound to stumble along the way – even the Psalmist grieves over the fact that he is prone to weakness in his struggles. Yet it is not the perfection of our walk, but the direction – constantly and faithfully onwards, as the exhortation goes: “Don’t stop. Further up and further in!”⁸

Personally, Ash’s explanations on this point helped me to reconcile Biblical statements that – on the face of it – seem to contradict one another: Deuteronomy 30 where God assures the Israelites that they *can* keep the commandments, and Paul’s emphasis to the Romans that *no one* can keep the Law and be righteous. It is not a matter of legalistic box-checking; it is rather the heart-intent of the seeker who ultimately relies on God’s *chesed*.

There is no magic bullet or instantaneous switch to flip – as Ash is careful to emphasize, to learn to delight in God’s word in our hearts takes consistent discipline, humility and an openness to the One who can actually accomplish it within us – God, by His Holy Spirit working hand in hand with His Word.

Indeed, the Psalm and Ash’s book both end on the ‘tension’ of being acutely aware of our own shortcomings – but consciously choosing to cast our cares onto the One who can see us through to the end by His *chesed*.

⁷ J. Warner Wallace, “How Eternity Changes the Problem of Evil (Video)”, *Cold-Case Christianity With J Warner Wallace* (accessed 11-May-2021): <https://coldcasechristianity.com/videos/how-eternity-changes-the-problem-of-evil-video/>

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (NY/USA: Macmillan Publishers, 1956).

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