

SERMON TITLE- "The Psalms- Israel's Songbook"

TEXT- Psalm 119

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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As we finished off the series in 2 Corinthians, Ryan and I discussed what our next series should be. The job of the preacher in a church is to lay out a balanced diet of God's Word. To do that, like a person thinking about a family's diet, we need to think of the different spiritual "food groups."

Slide of Food Groups

In the world of actually feeding people there are several different ways to try to define a good diet

As Canadians we are familiar with four food groups: vegetables and fruit, grain products, milk, and meat.

Another list has seven- carbohydrates, protein, dairy, fats, vitamins, fibre and minerals.

I even came across a colour coded version for children- orange — grains

green — vegetables

red — fruits

yellow — fats and oils

blue — milk and dairy products

purple — meat, beans, fish, and nuts

Everyone knows that simply dividing a food into groups is only the beginning of the story. The real task is getting the right balance of these foods into our bodies. But knowing that different foods do different things is important.

The food group picture is very applicable when we think of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are a significant part of our "diet". The Bible is very explicit on this point-

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness . . . 2

Timothy 3:16

So if it is "all" God-breathed and useful how do we make sure that it goes into our beings? I don't think that there is any substitute to actually reading it. I have mentioned this before- but one of the

blessings of modern technology is the accessibility of audio versions of the Bible. I am very convinced that these are wonderful tools that come alongside of the reading with we have taken for granted as the main way of getting the Scriptures into ourselves.

But all of this begs an important question- **what should our next sermon series be?** Ryan suggested a study in the Psalms. I didn't have to think very long before it made very good sense.

The Biblical food groups, like dietary ones have all kinds of angles-

The biggest division is OT and NT.

Within these there are letters [or epistles], histories, laws books, prophecies, apocalyptic writings, wisdom literature, poetry and others.

Many churches use a variation of the **OT, a Psalm, a Gospel and an Epistle**. I think that this is a very good simple version of types of Scripture.

The Past

As Anabaptists, we naturally spend a lot of time in the Gospel. I will also explain why.

We recently spent a significant time in an epistle [2 Corinthians].

Last year we did a major study in the Book of Isaiah.

So just on that scale we have covered 3 of the 4 categories and the Psalms are due for some attention.

And that is what we are going to do in the weeks ahead.

We began this topic with the matter of the "food groups" and if the Bible contains different types of "food" a good question is-

What Do The Biblical "Food Groups" Do?

And why is this important? Because there is a type of Scriptural "nutrient" that this type of writing gives to us. It is part of a healthy Scriptural diet.

What the various "food groups" actually "do" for the human body is of course quite technical and even mysterious but we know that they "do" different things.

There are different parts of the body that need different things-

-bones give structure

- muscles
- digestive track absorbs nutrients
- blood delivers energy
- nerves/brain

If we look at our spiritual beings there too different functions are at work. To understand how the various parts of Scripture might function in this context, let me suggest a very crude picture- and one that is very Anabaptist.

The Gospels- Who is Jesus? The foundation.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . Hebrews 1:1

Jesus is the very core of everything. If we don't know His words and stories we will be very lost. Some time ago I used an old children's story entitled, "Are You My Mother?" It is a story of a baby birth that hatches but doesn't know who his mother is.

Those who claim to be Christians and don't know who Jesus is are like that bird wandering around asking, dogs, cats, airplanes and excavators the question, "Are you my mother?" Even worse those who don't know about who Jesus is can easily identify with things that are not their "mother."

You could say that the Gospels and Acts are the raw material of Biblical food for Kingdom people.

The Epistles. Translation into life today.

That was our last series. It took on the question- "What is a follower of Jesus to do in the real world? How do we actually live out our ideals and values?"

The epistles of the NT, which make up more than ½ of it spend their whole time answering that question in different contexts. Again the writer of Hebrews says this-

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. Hebrews 2:1

Paying careful attention to our actual lives, in the context of who Jesus is and what He said, is critically important.

In some ways, you could say that the Epistles are the Biblical cookbook.

The Old Testament- the background

There is a famous saying, "Those who don't know and learn from the past- are doomed to repeat it."

Actual quote- "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." George Santayana, 1894

The OT is critically important. It is the story of God's dealing with humanity from the beginning of time until Jesus came to earth with a new message. We just need to know and study that story.

You could say that the OT is the cook book and raw material from a different period of God's reaching out to His people.

The Psalms- getting it into us

When I thought about what the Psalms do the quote that immediately came to mind was-

"A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down . . ." Mary Poppins 1964

Now that is far less somber than all of the other verses and quotes in today's sermon and it could sound trivial and silly. That is far from being the case, either with the Psalms or the point I am making.

We know that food is important for our bodies to function and in situation when our entire energy is focused on survival nothing but getting the right food into our body matters. Those who enjoy survival shows are very aware of this. Those who spend their entire energy trying to stay alive think of nothing else but getting nutrition into their bodies. That is the right thing to do.

But God did not design us to merely focus on nutrition when we eat- He also gave us taste buds.

That is also the case when it comes to our Biblical diet. Songs and poems are the "sugar and spice" that whet our appetites for the Biblical nourishment we need.

How Do They Do This?

Introduction To A Study In The Psalms- The Bible's Songbook

Why are the Psalms a Biblical "food group"? I think that almost everyone knows that the Psalms are the poetry/music book of the Bible. It easy to see way it is a unique category.

Of course, there are songs and poems all over the place, within the other books of the Bible, but here they are gathered together.

An example- Jonah's prayer

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish, and he said,

"I called out of my distress to the LORD,

And He answered me

I cried for help from the depth of Sheol;

You heard my voice.

"For You had cast me into the deep,

Into the heart of the seas,

And the current engulfed me

All Your breakers and billows passed over me."

Jonah 2:1-3

And those same words and phrases are folded into several Psalms.

O LORD, the God of my salvation, I have cried out by day and in the night before You.

Let my prayer come before You; Incline Your ear to my cry!

For my soul has had enough troubles, And my life has drawn near to Sheol.

I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit; I have become like a man without strength, Forsaken among the dead, Like the slain who lie in the grave, Whom You remember no more, And they are cut off from Your hand.

You have put me in the lowest pit, In dark places, in the depths.

Your wrath has rested upon me, And You have afflicted me with all Your waves. Selah. Psalm 88:1-7

Psalm 18

The cords of Sheol surrounded me; The snares of death confronted me.

In my distress I called upon the LORD, And cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, And my cry for help before Him came into His ears. Psalm 18:5-6

And what you see here in these 3 passages is a story and a theme that is told and re-told. On the one hand it is the very specific and exotic story of a man with a mission from God, who is running away from Him and amazingly swallowed by a whale. That exact story is extremely rare and not likely to be part of the experience of anyone here.

On the other hand it is a picture that people who are in distress and overwhelmed in all kinds of situations [many which are probably very ordinary] identify as their own.

Who is it that does not identify with the cry of Jonah? I suspect that everyone here identifies with this story.

The point of all this is that the Psalms are the collected versions of the poems and songs of God's people.

#1. They "Taste" Good

This is the most obvious feature of songs and poetry is that they are so enjoyable.

#2. They Implant God's Word Into Our Beings

This is the whole reason that God made food with flavour. It gets us to eat.

This was a very long introduction for the text today but we are also setting up for a longer series. We have looked at a couple of sections of Psalms already, but today's actual sermon text to introduce the series is Psalm 119.

So let's take a look at it-

Psalm 119

Aleph

1 Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD.

2 Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.

3 They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways.

4 You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.

5 Oh, that my ways were steadfast

in obeying your decrees!
6 Then I would not be put to shame
when I consider all your commands.
7 I will praise you with an upright heart
as I learn your righteous laws.
8 I will obey your decrees;
do not utterly forsake me.

Beth

9 How can a young man keep his way pure?
By living according to your word.
10 I seek you with all my heart;
do not let me stray from your commands.
11 I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you.
12 Praise be to you, O LORD;
teach me your decrees.
13 With my lips I recount
all the laws that come from your mouth.
14 I rejoice in following your statutes
as one rejoices in great riches.
15 I meditate on your precepts
and consider your ways.
16 I delight in your decrees;
I will not neglect your word.

The first thing to notice is that we have only read 2 of 22 sections. This is the longest chapter in the Bible with 176 verses. The 22 sections each correspond to a letter of the Hebrew alphabet and is an acrostic meaning that the first word of each section begins with that letter.

Psalm 119:1-8

Aleph- Blessed are they whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the LORD . . .

Psalm 119:9-16

Beth- How can a young man keep his way pure?
By living according to your word . . .

#1. It Sets Up A Pattern and A Rhythm

There was a time when society was far more dependant on memory than it is today. Today we don't have remember very much at all- after all we have Google at our finger tips.

But having so much information at our fingertips means that we don't necessarily have it in our beings.

The Psalms are designed to get the words of God into our beings.

And in doing so- They Create Healthy Rhythms

Part of this happens by the very nature of how poetry and music are made. They are not merely ideas strung together in sentences. The words are chosen, not just for their meanings but also for the sounds they make together and the number of syllables they contain.

How do we remember the alphabet or the months of the year? We turn them into songs with rhymes.

In poetry the shape of the sentences and words functions in different ways than narratives or epistles.

The main difference is the evocative nature of the way words are used by the poet- more deliberately than a historian might for example.

Psalm 119:9-10

Beth- How can a young man keep his way pure?
By living according to your word.
I seek you with all my heart;
do not let me stray from your commands.
I have hidden your word in my heart
that I might not sin against you.

#2. It Reminds Us That Our Behaviour Really Matters

Why do we care about the nutrition that our bodies need? Because we need our bodies to do things.

I remember being in university and studying literature and I distinctly remember being taught that the message of literature was not the point- the point was the pure art of the matter.

I grew up with literature all around me and I remember being astonished at such a statement. I knew that the whole point of virtually all literature is to drive home a point.

Yes, any artist can become so enthralled by his art that he forgets why he is doing it- but virtually all great literature drives home a point. To separate the art from the message guts it of its purpose.

Whether it was nursery rhymes of Paradise Lost- the point of them all was to teach good behaviour.

But make no mistake becoming enthralled with the pure art is an easy thing to do and we easily go down that.

Psalm 119, makes that point again and again.

Psalm 119:11-13

I seek you with all my heart;

do not let me stray from your commands.

I have hidden your word in my heart

that I might not sin against you.

Praise be to you, O LORD; teach me your decrees.

With my lips I recount

all the laws that come from your mouth.

#3. It Drives Home The Importance Of The Actual Words

The details matter. We also live in a world that favours the generalist. We don't have to worry about how words are spelled or the structure of a sentence. In fact our worlds are so full of words that we stop reading them.

When was the last time you purchased something that required you to sign a contract. Did you read it? It is unlikely. We sign papers with 1000s of words and we don't read any more than the first couple. We hope that the rest of the words are saying the kinds of things we are thinking about when we sign off.

For the most part it works out but it doesn't take much thinking to