

Time of Grace Ministry
Here I Am, Lord: With a Hunger to Learn
Scripture: Psalm 119:65-72
December 10, 2017

Pastor Michael Novotny

Hi, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny with Time of Grace. Do you know why you don't like some of the things that your least favorite politician says? Because he or she is your least favorite politician! Let me explain what I mean. Over 2,000 years ago, the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, talked about communication between two people. And he said that there were three factors in every bit of communication: The message, the passion, and the relationship. And he taught the Greek people that you can have a great message with true, solid, and helpful content and you could speak it with incredible passion but if you didn't have a good relationship with a speaker, if you didn't trust them as a person, all that message and all that passion would go to waste. So what happens when you open the Bible? There's a message there that God speaks with passion but sometimes it's difficult to follow; sometimes it's difficult to trust. But today, Pastor Mark Jeske is going to remind us that God doesn't just give us a message and he doesn't just speak it with passion in the Scriptures; he begins in the context of relationship. Of a heavenly Father who loves us. Of a Jesus who gave his life for us. Of a Holy Spirit who wants to open our eyes to beauty and joy and peace. So as you listen to God's word today, remember not just the message, remember the one who speaks it. Come to the Scriptures with a hunger to learn.

Pastor Mark Jeske

I got an email from a Time of Grace viewer a couple of months ago and the question went like this: "Dear Pastor Jeske, I'm gay. Can I be saved?" How would you have answered that one? The answer he got from me – this may or may not be what you would have written – the answer he got from me was, first of all, tell me something about yourself: Do you have a relationship with God? And secondly, tell me do you have a relationship with the Bible? Do you recognize the Bible as the words of God? Does it have any authority in your life? If you can't say to those first two questions, it's going to be a very different discussion because the mission of the Christian church is not to clean up the behaviors of the people of this country. The mission of the Christian church is to help people gain a relationship with God based on having a relationship with God's words.

Today, I'd like to talk to you about how important it is that we come with a hunger for the word because not of necessarily fear and doubt, but because of confusion. How should I be acting? What do you want, God? We have this relationship but what honestly do you expect? What is right and wrong? And I'd like to have you join me in allowing one of God's psalm writers to give us a vocabulary for talking to God about how imperative it is that we allow God to speak to us and inform us about the types of behaviors that he would like to see in the creatures that he has made.

And to do that, I'd like to invite you to go with me to one of the most amazing and even outrageous parts of Scripture. In fact, it's so unusual and initially, at least, a little hard to get at

that you may not like it very much and that is Psalm 119. And if you look at your Bible – those of you who have a Bible out right now – you’ll see that the stanzas are separated out and our text editors have actually given each one a title but what kind of weird talk is Aleph? Beth? Gimel? Daleth? He? What is that? And then there is some Chinese-y kind of writing next to it. That actually isn’t Chinese; that’s Hebrew and these actually are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This is an acrostic psalm. I’m giving you a free new word today; remember you heard it here first. Acrostic means it’s alphabet-based. In Hebrew – you can’t tell this in English because it’s untranslatable – but in the original Hebrew each one of the eight lines of stanza one starts with the letter aleph. Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth, these are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. You can actually sing it: “Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth, He, Waw, Zayin.” It actually has a little song you can sing with it. There just happened to be 22 stanzas and 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet; go figure. What a perfect coincidence!

On top of that, there are about eight or so synonyms for the word of God. It’s called the word, the precepts, the commands, the testimonies, the judgments, the decrees, the statutes. And then the most famous word of all, the one that also makes this a little hard to understand, is the word that you will run into translated as “law.” Now in our secular world, law means the rules, which you are punished if you break. And if you are into protestant theology, you know about law and gospel. In Bible talk, the law is the bad news of God that smacks you and crushes you to the ground, holding or rubbing your face in a standard of holiness that God expects and thinks he can demand from you and threatening terrible punishments, including hell if you break them. So the law is kind of tremble-y kind of talk and it seems a little crazy when you hear this psalm writer saying, “Man, I love your law.” It’s like who likes being told what a sinful jerk you are? Like this makes no sense to me and so you don’t get much joy out of it because it doesn’t make sense. We’re stuck with a semi-untranslatable word. The real – the word that’s used in Hebrew for law – is Torah. Now if you have any Jewish friends, you know that they revere Torah, by which they mean the first five books of Moses and you’ll maybe have seen on TV or maybe you’ve been in a synagogue to visit, they have two beautifully hand-printed scrolls of the first five books of Moses and they’re in a beautiful velvet bag with tassels and big, long, wooden rods and they are carefully, lovingly placed in the front, the place of honor, in every synagogue. They call that their Torah. The root meaning of Torah, the basic meaning of Torah, is instruction. So it simply means the teachings of God, among which is the words of the law of the commandments of God, which he demands of human behavior, but that’s not the main meaning of Torah; the main meaning is instruction. So when you hear the psalm writer of Psalm 119 say, “I love your law, O Lord,” mentally translate, “I love being instructed by you. I love it when you teach me things, Lord.” And that makes more sense, doesn’t it? Man, I love that, too. I love to learn things. I’m hungry for the word. I’ve got so much confusion in my head; I am hungry for the word. Nobody knows who wrote it. Nobody knows when it arose. It simply is God’s gift to us. This acrostic psalm, it’s like the ABC’s of the glory of the word of God if you want to put it that way.

I’d like to read just one of these little 22 stanzas with you today and almost every one of the 176 verses has one of these eight synonyms for the word of God in it. So it seems to be saying almost the same thing over and over but it is a tightly structured, elegantly crafted, mathematically organized and arranged set of beautiful little miniature one-liners of how cool the word of God is. So let’s have a look and see what God has for you today.

And I'd like to invite you to go to the stanza, starting at verse 65 – I feel like I'm on Sesame Street. Today's show is brought to you by the letter Teth, ha! It's like Jewish – we're having Jewish Sesame Street here. Brought to you by the letter Teth. It's just T, the letter T or one of the two T's in the Hebrew language. Have you found the spot? Psalm 119 verse 65 – have I left you in the dust or are you still with me? Got the spot? Nod if you're – okay, good. Phew. Let's just kind of ponder this together: “Do good to your servant according to your,” and here you'll hear the eight words for the word of God, “according to your word, O Lord. Teach me knowledge and good judgment for I believe in your commands.” That's why it's so impossible to have a discussion on the Christian view of human sexuality, for instance. If the person you're talking with does not say, “I believe in your commands,” you're going to talk in circles. Save your breath, for your goal, after all, is not to try to clean up somebody else's behavior; your goal, remember, is to encourage a relationship with God and with his word. And later on, they will then be willing to let God talk to them. Until that relationship exists, your behavioral advice is nothing but nagging and traditionalism for your traditions being laid on them and they say, “Get lost. I don't have to obey your rules.” So the relationship is what matters. “I believe in your commands. Before I was afflicted I went astray,” so here the psalm writer speaks to the fact that we are sinners. “Now I obey your word.” You helped straighten me out. I was wandering; I was astray. So the word is a corrective. It pulls us back. It's like a border collie that goes after those lost sheep or the straying goats that are wandering off and God pulls us back in and the psalm writer admits that I was a naughty boy – or perhaps, or who knows if a woman wrote this – I was a bad boy and I drifted off but you went after me. Now I obey. You're good. How do you know that God is good unless he reveals what he's been up to? Nobody knows about what God has done for the human race unless it's revealed to us by the Scripture. “You are good. What you do is good” so I can trust you. I can trust what you're up to and I can trust that your words are good for me, too.

“Teach me your decrees.” I want to learn. I'm hungry for your word. Teach me what you're up to, “though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart.” So this helps us to be realistic to realize we have headwinds in life. You have a formidable enemy in hell who with his demons and with the human agents who knowingly and unknowingly do Satan's will, they're after you to torment you, to break your spirit, to whisper lies into your head, to steer you down a path of self-destruction and to try to persuade you to commit spiritual suicide. Since they cannot tear you out of the arms of Christ, they can whisper and persuade you to jump. And you will have headwinds your whole life. There will be demonic enemies going after you and the human beings who do Satan's bidding will come after you and make your faith life hard. Expect it. It was going on back then – this could have come from – if this came from the time of David, that's 1000 B.C. so it's like for three millennia this has been going on and even earlier than that. Assume it and expect resistance.

“Their hearts are callous and unfeeling but I delight in your,” Torah, in your instruction. I love it when you teach me. I want to learn. Lord, I am hungry for you word. “It was good for me to be afflicted.” What? What? Did I – is that what I really – it's good for me to be afflicted? Thank you, sir, may I have another? Like what? Good to be afflicted? Man, am I glad I was so sick. What? Thank God I had that financial meltdown. How great it is to be at the edge of bankruptcy. Woohoo! It's good to be afflicted – my family broke up. What? It's good to be afflicted? Now I'm really glad all my friends kind of dumped me or betrayed me. I'm really

glad that my relationship that I was counting on for marriage broke up. Yeah, I love affliction. What? Only God could pull this off. “It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.” And God is like a surgeon with like a laser scalpel and sometimes he has to burn off diseased tissue in our lives. Sometimes a financial reversal might be great medicine to keep us from getting addicted to material possessions. And I know we don’t really respect that. I know you’re saying, “Lord, I am in no danger of materialism. Bring it on! I can handle wealth. I can handle power and success. Bring it on; bring me more,” and God is thinking, “Don’t talk so fast, my son, or my daughter. Maybe not.” And God, unfortunately, has watched his children become addicted to things and sometimes having things taken away is a better blessing to you than having him give you more money and wealth. Sometimes you got so full of your own life that a little spell of physical weakness gave you the time to pray that you said you didn’t have time for; gave you some time on your back to rethink the meaning of your life. Unfortunately, people do not always handle success and prosperity very well and affliction is the best possible thing God could do for them to let it come into their life, to redirect and make him their number one relationship. Once you have faced the prospect of dying and you have to look at what comes next for me, the word of God sounds a lot more important to someone who’s been at that point in life. When you think when you’re young and strong and if everything’s going well, you kind of think you’re bulletproof and immortal and you’ve got everything going on. You get deaf to God. And in this way, affliction can actually be the best possible thing that could happen because it reengages you by making you look up to heaven and say, “I need some help here. I cannot do this by myself.”

“I want to learn your decrees. The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.” Can you say that with a straight face? Or is this how you read this – if you were reading this out loud at a family devotion – is this you? “Okay, everybody, finish the last forkful of dessert,” and one of the kids is reading this or let’s say mom is reading this, “O Lord, the law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver,” and go – “Yeah, right!” Could you say this with a straight face? That the word of God is more precious to you than anything else you possess? I think we would like to say that. I think in our better moments we do mean and believe that but I have had plenty of personal moments where my actions did not look like this and a lot of garbage-y thoughts running through my mind and the values that I put on things and I have not always made this true of me. And I invite you to be brutally honest and admit it yourself. And so this is a moment right now to pause in the craziness of our lives and take inventory of our real values.

Here’s what reconnecting with God’s word does for us. First of all, it clears up the uncertainties in our heads. Satan loves mess and chaos and he wants to get you to tip everything upside down where right becomes wrong, wrong becomes right, up is down, and down is up and have you so confused you no longer have a reliable moral compass for life. The Lord tells you in clear terms the difference between right and wrong. He can give you confidence in your life. Satan’s ultimate victory is when he so torments people and confuses people that they end up killing themselves for they have no hope. One of the common denominators of all of the thousands and thousands of suicides in our country every year is that people believe they have no hope; that nothing in their life is going to get better. And they will do anything – even suicide – just to stop the hurting inside. That’s from hell. That’s Satan talking and whispering. God’s word gives us hope. It helps connect us with the victory. The people writing the psalms in their day saw the

victory of God through the slaughter of animal sacrifices whereby the animal received the punishments of God and the people received the innocence of the victim. This was a divine drama getting people ready for Good Friday. And when the Lamb of God was put to death for the sin of the world, the forgiveness of God came upon the world and those who believe it, have it. Only the Bible can connect you with that life-changing confidence. Lord, here I am, and I am hungry for your word because I am hungry to be assured that there still is hope for me. The word of God helps you trust that God is good, that his rules aren't there to jerk you around.

I think probably if you live long enough, you have the experience of having to wait in a long line to deal with some governmental office where there's a bored clerk, a very low-ranking clerk, who's feeling pretty insecure and loves exercising that little bit of power they have to jerk you around, make you wait, tell you to come back another day. Maybe it's when you go to protest a traffic ticket or a parking violation that you know you were not in the wrong and you can spend a morning working your way through and finally getting to a human being who instead of looking at the evidence you've marshalled will say, "Come back another day for your hearing." And you think, "Argh!" The Lord has hope for you. He gives you worth; gives meaning to your life. He gives you his love. And the way you can be sure it's really coming to you is through his word and gives you confidence that he's good. He's not just jerking you around because it gives him pleasure to make you jump through his little hoops. There is goodness behind his divine principles for how you behave, which includes the very hot button emotional issues of human sexuality and human marriage. His ways are good.

He also gives you the ability to obey. The ability to want to obey someone else's instructions is learned behavior. Ask any parent – children are not born with a desire to obey. They fight it every step of the way. And that's what makes parenting so exhausting is kids don't cooperate and I don't say this to put anybody else down – least of all my own children – because I was the same way and I'm sure I took plenty of starch out of my parents as I fought the instruction that they tried to give me. But I needed to learn how to obey. You and I need to learn obedience to God's words and it comes through letting the word talk to us. It inculcates a willing spirit within us. It helps us to process the meaning of our lives to see the hardships we face not just as God's punishments but it may just be that God allows us to go through them as ways to make us better and actually to help us.

And I'd like to invite you right now to believe with me that the law from your mouth, the instruction, the Torah from your mouth, is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold. You can accumulate a treasure and the minute you die, it will belong to somebody else. There's no u-hauls behind a hearse. They can bury you like King Tut with your jewelry and valuable possessions but you won't be able to lay a hand on them ever again. Everything physical and tangible will be taken from you fairly soon but what can never be taken from you is your relationship with the Lord who gives you love and forgiveness and immortality. And I invite you today to let this amazing psalm – 176 times in a row – tell you how cool it is that God gave us his word to give us the clarity, the mental clarity, to give us instruction out of our confusion, to give us confidence to trust his word, to believe in what he has told us, to let him explain our lives to us, and to give us the way to live a joyful life and never, ever again to be afraid to die for that just becomes the gateway to everlasting life. Lord, your word is more valuable to us than thousands and thousands of pieces of silver and gold, Amen.

Pastor Michael Novotny

Recently, a friend told me about an incredible new invention that allows people to read over 100 books in a single month. Apparently, this company has taken non-fiction books, boiled them down to 10 or 15 minutes of audio that you can listen to in the car on your work or picking up the grandkids. I think if you play them on double speed, you can cut that time in half.

We live in a culture where there is so much information. There are people who are devouring dozens, if not hundreds or thousands, of books every year. But God challenges us in a different way. Not to read as much as we possibly can, but to focus our hearts, our minds, and especially our souls on the one book that we don't speed through but we read through. We come to the Bible with a hunger to learn and when we do, when we slow down our busy lives, when we don't try to finish a devotion, check the box called "Bible study," but we think and meditate deeply on God's promises, that's when everything changes.

Psalm 1 says, "Blessed is the person whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on God's law day and night." Like a dog enjoying a bone. In the Hebrew scriptures, like a lion who's just enjoying the prey that he caught. The child of God gets to chew on God's word, to savor it, to enjoy it, until it gets down to his or her soul and nothing is the same.

So do you want to be blessed? Do you want to have spiritual happiness in your life? Then don't speed through as many books as you can and don't speed through your next church service. Instead, as Pastor Jeske told us, come with a hunger to learn.

Would you join me now and pray?

Dear Jesus, you are the living bread. You are the bread of life that can only and truly and everlastingly satisfy our souls. We thank you that you are always there for us. When we have a hunger for companionship, for acceptance, for love, for forgiveness, for hope, for a future, you feed us day after day. God, many of us pray before each meal. We're so thankful that you are good and your mercy endures forever. But help us not just to say those words but to chew on that promise that you are good. This week, you will be good and next week you will be good and for every moment of our lives, you will be good and your mercy will endure forever. Help us to enjoy that promise, God, until it gets deep within us and satisfies our soul. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus, our bread of life, Amen.

With Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny and it all starts now.



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Here I Am, Lord: With a Hunger to Learn

Psalm 119:65-72: ⁶⁵“Do good to your servant according to your word, LORD. ⁶⁶Teach me knowledge and good judgment, for I trust your commands. ⁶⁷Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. ⁶⁸You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees. ⁶⁹Though the arrogant have smeared me with lies, I keep your precepts with all my heart. ⁷⁰Their hearts are callous and unfeeling, but I delight in your law. ⁷¹It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. ⁷²The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.”

Points to Ponder

1. Read Psalm 119:67. What is our natural state of behavior? How does affliction help us keep to God’s Word?
2. Read Psalm 119:68. How does God reveal his goodness to us?
3. According to verse 69, what is one affliction of being a Christian?
4. When the psalmist says, “It was good for me to be afflicted,” what does he mean? What happened through that affliction? Has that happened in your life too?
5. According to verse 72, what should our attitude toward God’s Word be?

God connects with us through his Word and reveals his goodness to us. Through it, he shows us his will for our lives and it gives us hope when we read about his love and the gift of salvation we have through faith in Jesus. Sometimes we have troubles, but those troubles bring us closer to God when we look to him for encouragement. God's Word is our most precious treasure because it contains all we need.

What else does God say?

Psalm 119:105: Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

Psalm 119:130: The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.