

The Only Thing Needed -- Scripture: Psalm 119:97-112

*Sermon by Rev. Dale Rose at Lake Joseph Community Church
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I used to be smart – at least smarter than I am now. Let me get back to that statement in a moment. I am always amazed at the capacity of the human brain to store trivia and minutiae. Let me give you an example. I can name every Stanley Cup winning hockey team for the past fifty years. Just give me the year and I can tell you who won the cup – and probably who they defeated in the finals. The Maple Leafs, by the way, are not on that list! Why do I know this information? I have no idea, other than that I am a hockey fan. Probably many of you can ream off interesting trivia. Think about the popularity of the game show *Jeopardy*. For over thirty years people have been matching their wits and knowledge of trivia with the various contestants. The brain is an amazing organ for storing information. So let me get back to my opening statement for a moment. I used to be smart – at least smarter than I am now. When my children were younger, I used to share interesting facts with them. By and large they believed me. “Dad is older than us – there must be some truth to it.” But you know what they do now. They whip out their smart phones and i-Phones and they fact-check me. That’s right. “Dad, that’s not really correct.” Or “Dad those facts seem mixed up.” Or my favourite: “Dad, you have mis-remembered that story.”

Well, I’m not convinced that Google has completely replaced good old-fashioned memory. This is especially true when it comes to the things of faith. Those of you of a certain vintage will remember your Sunday School days and something called the “sword drill.” Everyone held up their Bible and the teacher would give you a verse. Then the first person to look it up won a prize. If you are over the age of 55, you will remember reading the Bible and memorizing verses from one of two versions: either the King James Version or maybe the Revised Standard Version, because those were the only two available back then. Today there are many different Bible translations out there. Now don’t get me wrong – anything that gets people reading the Bible more is a good thing. But having many versions does make it challenging when it comes to memorizing verses.

As Christians, we believe the Bible to be the Word of God. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we believe it gives us everything we need to live the Christian life. It is our rule of faith and practice. Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian, was arguably the greatest theological mind of the 20th century. A number of stories have arisen about Barth, especially during his later years. Some are true, and perhaps some are apocryphal. I love one story that supposedly comes from his last year of teaching at seminary. A student asked him a question in class one day. “Dr. Barth, you have studied the Bible for many years. What is the greatest truth you have learned about God and Jesus?” Barth thought for a moment and said: “This is the greatest lesson I have learned: Jesus loves me, this I know; For the Bible tells me so.” Amazing – the great theologian quoted that beloved children’s hymn – both a simple yet profound truth. It is the Bible – God’s Word – that gives us direction and helps us stay on the journey.

However, human nature being what it is, we are prone to wander. Our sin and frailty get the better of us. Our pride gets in the way. We want a different direction, so we chart our own course instead of God’s. There is a story about two ships that were on a collision course sailing at night. They could see each other’s lights in the distance. One ship signaled to the other: “Alter your course 10 degrees north. A message came back: “No – alter your course 10 degrees south.” The captain of the first ship was annoyed and sent a second message: “I am a captain. Alter your course 10 degrees north.” The reply came back: “No – alter your course 10 degrees south – I am a seaman third class.” Well, the captain of the first ship was now very angry at this act of insubordination by a lower class sailor. So he sent a final message which he knew would invoke fear in that ship: “Alter your course now – we are a battleship.” To which came the reply: “No – alter your course. We are a lighthouse.” Sometimes you can be on the path to destruction and not even know it.

There are many voices, many lights, and many paths in our world. The question is: Which voices will we listen to? Which lights will we follow? Which paths will we go down? The truth is, God is not that hard to find if we really want to know him. Jeremiah wrote: “Thus says the Lord: When you search for me you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart.” (Jeremiah 29:13) This morning we are looking at one of the great passages of the Old Testament. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in

the Bible – 176 verses. It is unique among the Psalms, in that it is written like an acrostic. It is divided into twenty-two sections, each corresponding to a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each section has eight verses. Some scholars believe this was designed to aid Hebrew students who were memorizing scripture. The other unique thing is that almost all 176 verses make some reference to God’s Word, using words like ordinances, statutes, testimonies, commandments and so forth. The Psalm also contains one of the better known verses in the Psalms. Verse 105: “Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.”

The longer I am a Christian and the longer I am in ministry, the more convinced I am that the Bible is indeed our rule of faith and practice. It transcends cultures and generations. It is all we need for the Christian journey, if we read it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the anchor which grounds us in the firm foundation of Christ. It reminds me of a Maritime hymn we used to sing when I was growing up: “We have an anchor that keeps the soul, Steadfast and sure while the billows roll; Fastened to the rock which cannot move, Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love.” Psalm 119 contains so many wonderful references to God’s Word. But these verses we have read today form the heart of this Psalm. And they reveal the heart of the writer. The Psalmist gives us five ways that God’s Word benefits us. There are certainly more than that, but I want to focus briefly on these five:

1) First, the writer tells us that scripture should be part of our daily meditation. Verse 97: “O how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long.” Doctors tell us that we need at least twenty minutes of sustained exercise every day to stay healthy. And the effects of physical exercise are cumulative. You don’t start out running a marathon, but you train slowly over weeks and months. It should be the same with our spiritual formation. The devotional life is developed over time. Maybe you read the Bible a few times a week. Then you try to read it daily, and eventually make it a habit with the life of prayer. Meditating on God’s Word equips us to face the challenges of life.

2) Second, the Psalmist tells us that God’s Word imparts wisdom and understanding. Verses 98-99: “Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers,

for your decrees are my meditation.” It is God’s Word which grants us wisdom to make the difficult choices in life. Back in 1915, a young man was preparing to leave England and return to his native United States. He was about to gain international fame as a writer and poet, but as yet he was still unknown. Before he left, he composed a short poem to amuse a friend. It was almost meant as a joke. But it became one of his well-known poems, and one of the best loved poems of the 20th century. The poet was Robert Frost, and the poem was called *The Road Not Taken*. It speaks of making decisions and following forks in the road of life. Many of us can recite the final lines: “I shall be telling this with a sigh, Somewhere ages and ages hence; Two roads diverged in a wood and I – I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.” God’s Word challenges us to take the road less traveled. It is the road to the Father, and in the end it is the only road worth traveling.

3) Third, the writer of this Psalm reminds us that God’s Word is a lamp that lights our way. Verse 105: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Everyone needs light, but especially the light of God’s truth. In ancient times, the Psalmist’s “lamp” probably referred to a candle. The thing about a candle is that if you are in total darkness, it only allows you to see a few steps in front of you. It’s the same with a modern flashlight. You can only see so far down the way. God leads us just a step at a time. The rest we have to take by faith. But the Bible helps illuminate the way for us.

4) Fourth, the Psalmist says that the Word of God keeps us on a straight path. It provides us with guidance. Verse 110: “The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.” As a pastor, people sometimes ask me: “What is the best translation of the Bible to read?” I like how the pastor Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, answers that question. When someone asks him about which translation of the Bible is best, he says: “The one which translates into your life.” You see the Bible is not meant just to inform us. It is meant to transform us. James writes: “Be doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” (James 1:22) We need to be doers of the Word. The Bible seeks to do more than just correct our behavior and show us what is right and wrong. It should radically transform our lives. This is why I believe all of us should be involved in

Bible study. Join a study at your own church. It will deepen your faith and change your life for the better.

5) Finally, the writer of this Psalm sums up this section by speaking of our heritage. God's Word is our heritage now and always. Verse 111: "Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart." Our heritage and hope are found in God. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa a generation ago. In 1992 he was interviewed by *Christianity Today* magazine. He was asked: "After all you have endured in your struggle, are you optimistic about the future of your country?" "No," he said. "I am not optimistic. But I am hopeful. Because a Christian is always a prisoner of hope." That is the message of the gospel in a nutshell. The evil of Good Friday was not the end. Hope came out of despair on Easter Sunday. Evil never has the last word – God does.

There is another wonderful verse in Psalm 27:4: "One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in his temple." Is this not what it is all about in the end? We ask many things of God. We ask many things of ourselves. Of other people and of life in general. But really only one thing matters.

To the rich young ruler, Jesus said: "There is only one thing you lack." When Martha was scurrying about preparing a big meal, Jesus reminded her that "only one thing was needful" – and he wasn't referring to a dish. Jesus told a parable about a merchant who sells everything he has in order to obtain one pearl of great price. The world tells us to wrap our arms around as many things as possible. In trying to grab it all, we actually miss what's really important. What if we could be satisfied with just one thing? There is only one thing that is truly enough – and that is God. The Psalmist speaks of it throughout our scripture today – to be grounded in God's Word, to dwell in his house all our days.

In the words of Frost's poem: "Two roads diverged in a wood and I – I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." The journey with Jesus is the road less traveled. Are we willing to follow him wherever it leads? As we seek to be people of the Word, may the words of Paul to Timothy be our guide

today: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)