



Living Blamelessly: New Perspectives on Paul and the Psalter

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“**H**appy are those whose way is blameless,” says the author of Ps 119, “who walk in the law of the LORD” (v. 1). No doubt! But those Christian readers whose faith is informed by Pauline, Augustinian, and Lutheran traditions have always had some trouble with the possibility of blamelessness.

Again, “O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?” asks Ps 15:1, one of the gate liturgies that apparently provided an entrance rite for pilgrims coming to the temple. And the priest responds, “Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right” (Ps 15:2)—which means, as I always joke in my Psalms classes, that all the Lutheran types in the crowd turn around and head back to Galilee.

But do such stereotypical responses do justice to the biblical understanding in these matters? It gets a bit more difficult to dismiss the possibility of living blamelessly (because of a Lutheran confessional perspective), when Paul claims precisely that for himself (Phil 3:6) and urges it also for the Philippians (2:15) and

The Old Testament, Jesus, and Paul all call upon God’s people to be “blameless.” But is this possible for believers who know all too well their sin before God, who confess it daily and weekly? In the Bible, to be blameless is not an abstract virtue or something to be achieved once for all, but a way of life, a calling to walk daily in the law of the Lord.

the Thessalonians (1 Thess 3:13).¹ And Jesus ups the ante by commanding: “Be perfect [a related Greek term], therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48).

THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL

An investigation into what Paul meant by living blamelessly could take us quickly to a full-blown discussion of the now not-so-new perspective on Paul, which revolves in part around the question of just how “Lutheran” was the apostle, and what was his attitude toward the law—though such a full discussion is beyond the scope of this article.

The “new perspective” was given its title by James D. G. Dunn in his 1982 Manson Memorial Lecture, “The New Perspective on Paul.”² Dunn was responding primarily to the earlier work of E. P. Sanders, who had convincingly argued that the long-held understanding of first-century Judaism as a religion of legalistic works-righteousness was simply false.³ Sanders coined the term “covenantal nomism” to describe Rabbinic Judaism, which he defined as “the view that one’s place in God’s plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to the commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression.”⁴ In summary, Sanders argued that “*obedience maintains one’s position in the covenant, but it does not earn grace as such*. It simply keeps an individual in the group which is the recipient of God’s grace.”⁵

Indeed, for Dunn, “Judaism’s whole religious self-understanding was based on the premise of grace—that God had freely chosen Israel and made his covenant with Israel, to be their God and they his people. This covenant relationship was regulated by the law, not as a way of entering the covenant, or of gaining merit, but as the way of living *within* the covenant.”⁶ Dunn, however, went beyond Sanders by arguing that, for Paul, “works of the law” did not mean the law in general, but the particular requirements of Judaism, like circumcision, food laws, and sabbath. “*Covenant* works had become too closely identified as *Jewish* observances.”⁷ Thus, according to Dunn, Paul’s justification by faith is a consequence of a new eschato-

¹The NIV’s “as for legalistic righteousness, blameless” in Phil 3:6 seriously misses the mark. As Morna Hooker notes, “Paul is not caricaturing his previous life as a religion of legalism; on the contrary, he is listing it among the privileges he once possessed” (in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* XI [Nashville: Abingdon, 2000] 526). In this look back, Paul is not arguing *against* his past life but *for* something more.

²James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983) 95–122. Online at <http://markgoodacre.org/PaulPage/New.html> (accessed 5 April 2010). See now, Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). See also the Face to Face articles on this topic by John Meech and Diane Roth on pp. 438–441 of this issue.

³See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

⁴*Ibid.*, 75.

⁵*Ibid.*, 420 (emphasis in the original).

⁶James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, 2 vols. (Dallas: Word, 1988) 1:lxv (emphasis in the original).

⁷Dunn, “New Perspective” (online), 10 (emphasis in the original).

logical perspective. God had always meant the covenant people to be a blessing to the nations, and now the advent of Christ has introduced “the time of fulfillment.” Thus, “the covenant should no longer be conceived in nationalistic or racial terms....The covenant is not thereby abandoned. Rather it is broadened out as God has originally intended.”⁸ Paul is nowhere disparaging works *per se*. It is the law “as a Jewish prerogative and national monopoly” to which Paul is opposed. “The law understood in terms of the command ‘to love your neighbor as yourself’ is another matter (Gal. 5:14).”⁹

It seems, then, that the “new perspective” might not have so difficult a time with Paul’s claim and call to walk “blamelessly.”¹⁰ Indeed, Martin Luther might agree: “Now [says Paul to the Galatians, according to Luther], I shall teach you about truly good works, to make you recognize that the silly and fanatical ceremonial works, which are all that the false apostles insist on, are far inferior to the true works of love.”¹¹

THE “NEW PERSPECTIVE” ON THE OLD TESTAMENT

While the influences on Paul were many, his Bible—our Old Testament (primarily the Septuagint)—was surely one of them. And recent studies have provided a new perspective on Old Testament theology that has, no doubt, colored the view of recent interpreters of Paul as well. The argument of Pauline scholars that Palestinian Judaism was not a legalistic religion is paralleled (in fact, generally preceded) by the argument of twentieth-century Old Testament theologians that neither was the religion of Israel, as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. Christian seminary education in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century tended either to echo popular notions of Old Testament/law, New Testament/gospel or to understand the Old Testament as depicting just another religion (Schleiermacher)¹² or a history of failure (a “miscarriage,” according to Bultmann)¹³ that offered little to provide a meaningful theological background for New Testament Christianity. But then mid-twentieth-century students began to hear about a “God who acts” in the Old Testament (George Ernest Wright)¹⁴ or to learn that the book was part one of

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 12.

¹⁰For a summary of the “new perspective” discussion, see Mark M. Mattison, “A Summary of the New Perspective on Paul,” online at <http://www.thepaulpage.com/a-summary-of-the-new-perspective-on-paul/> (accessed 5 April 2010). For a review, see Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student’s Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), esp. “Toward a New Perspective on Paul” (95–126) and “Beyond the New Perspective” (127–163).

¹¹Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964) 52.

¹²See Paul E. Capetz, “Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Old Testament,” *Harvard Theological Review* 102/3 (2009) 297–325.

¹³Rudolf Bultmann, “Prophecy and Fulfillment,” in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann (Richmond: John Knox, 1963) 50–75, esp. 72–75. Bultmann’s essay was originally published in German in 1949.

¹⁴George Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952).

God's "salvation history."¹⁵ Suddenly, the Old Testament was not a dead book of deadly legalism, but a rich theological witness to the nature and character of God—the God who was the Father of Jesus Christ.

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The radicality of the change is exemplified nowhere so strikingly as in the new understanding of Israel's cult and sacrificial system, which, for Ludwig Köhler in 1935, was "Man's Expedient for His Own Redemption,"¹⁶ whereas, for Gerhard von Rad in 1957, the sacrificial system was "a saving event" by which "Jahweh removed the baneful influence of an act. He broke the nexus of sin and calamity."¹⁷

Von Rad—himself a Lutheran—went on to speak directly of what he understood to be a misuse of the Old Testament in traditional Lutheran theology:

There is no basis in the Old Testament for the well-known idea which early Lutheranism exalted to almost canonical status, that Israel was compelled by God's law to an ever greater zeal for the Law, *and that, precisely through this service to the Law and the yearning it evoked for true salvation, Israel was to be prepared for Christ.*¹⁸

Moreover, according to von Rad: "[T]he fulfilling of the commandments was nowhere experienced as a burden, which men at best could only partially carry out, but was rather an *act of confession.*"¹⁹ Indeed, "[T]he prophetic preaching of the law regards Israel's sin as quite incomprehensible."²⁰

Clearly, we are coming here to a more positive understanding of the Old Testament, the law, and eventually Judaism than had previously been presented. This understanding led Wolfhart Pannenberg in 1972 to publicly apologize for his previously held and published view that "the religion of the Law and the Jewish relig-

¹⁵For example, Oscar Cullmann, "The Linear Conception of Time..." in *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950) 51–60. The German original was published in 1946. See also Henning Graf Reventlow's discussion of "The Salvation-Historical Model," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 497–498.

¹⁶Ludwig Köhler, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. A. S. Todd (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957) 181–198 (German, 1935).

¹⁷Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962) 271 (German, 1957).

¹⁸Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 405. Note: I have retranslated the words in italics to give, in my opinion, a clearer rendition of the German original. Von Rad wrote that Israel "gerade durch diesen Getstzesdienst und durch die von ihm erweckte Sehnsucht nach dem wahren Heil auf Christus vorbereitet werden sollte" (*Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 2, 4th ed. [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1965]) 432.

¹⁹Von Rad, *OT Theology*, vol. 1, 381. Again, "act of confession" (in italics) is my translation of the German "Bekennnisakt," rather than the less clear "act of avowal" in Stalker's translation (see *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, vol. 1, 5th ed. [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1966]) 393).

²⁰Von Rad, *OT Theology*, vol. 2, 406.

ion” were identical.²¹ The same atmosphere led German Lutheran systematic theologian Helmut Thielicke to ask directly in 1973, “Who really understands the law, Paul or modern OT scholars?”²²—requiring from Thielicke a lengthy reexamination of the relation between law and gospel in the Old and New Testaments.²³ Thielicke finally concludes that “Paul is advancing a conceptual construct with no intention of referring historically to the OT understanding of the law.”

Paul does not simply have the law of the old covenant in view when he speaks of its accusatory, condemnatory, and questioning character. When he sees the revelation of God’s will in the light of the gospel, we find astonishing analogies to the OT relation of covenant and law. The law becomes the exhortation that follows the gospel. It is a consecutive “that.” It is no longer a mere imperative but also a future promise. When *Paul sees the law in opposition to the gospel, he has in view a specific relation to the law*, namely, the relation which arises when we do not stand on the ground of the new covenant, nor ask after the will of God in terms of the gospel, and are thus confronted with its consuming penal force.²⁴

It seems evident that the “new perspective” on the Old Testament has influenced both systematic theologians and New Testament scholars in their reexamination of Paul. All of these later twentieth-century writers had gone to school under this “new perspective” on the Old Testament. It caused them to raise anew the question of the understanding and function of the law in Judaism and in the New Testament.²⁵

ON WALKING BLAMELESSLY IN THE PSALTER

So, back to where we started. Is it possible to be “blameless” (רָם־נֶפֶשׁ) as the Psalter commends (Ps 119:1), or to be “perfect” (τέλειος) as Jesus commands (Matt 5:48)?²⁶ What might this mean?

“Blameless” (רָם־נֶפֶשׁ) occurs often in the Old Testament, with the sense of “wholeness” or “completeness.” An animal that is “acceptable” for sacrifice must

²¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, *The Apostles’ Creed in the Light of Today’s Questions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) viii.

²²Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 2, *The Doctrine of God and of Christ*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 201 (German, 1973).

²³*Ibid.*, 199–233.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 213. Once more, I have retranslated the words in italics from the German original. The use of “counterpart” in the published English translation is not strong enough to render Thielicke’s argument that Paul sees his construct of the law as a “Widerspieler” (literally, something that “plays against,” an opponent) of the gospel. See *Der Evangelische Glaube*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1973) 257.

²⁵For example, both Sanders and Dunn refer to twentieth-century Old Testament studies that define “righteousness” in relational terms rather than as an absolute ethical standard as background for their interpretation of Paul’s “righteousness of God” (Rom 1:17, etc.). Dunn, *Romans*, 1:40–42; Sanders includes a long appendix on this issue by Manfred T. Brauch, “Perspectives on ‘God’s righteousness’ in recent German discussion,” in Sanders, *Paul*, 523–542.

²⁶Among others, M. Eugene Boring points out that Matthew takes τέλειος from his Bible (the Septuagint) as a translation of רָם־נֶפֶשׁ, referring particularly to Deut 18:13: “You shall be perfect (Heb: רָם־נֶפֶשׁ; LXX: τέλειος) before the Lord your God” (Boring’s translation); in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 196.

be **בְּטָהוֹרָה** (that is, “without blemish,” as in Lev 22:19 and often). Noah was “blameless” (Gen 6:9), as were Abraham (Gen 17:1), David (2 Sam 22:24=Ps 18:23), Job (Job 12:4), and, later, Aaron (Wis 18:21) and Elizabeth and Zechariah (Luke 1:6).²⁷ Not just the heroes of the faith are blameless, however; this is to be a characteristic of all Israel (Deut 18:13; Ps 15:2; 19:13; 119:1; Wis 10:15).²⁸ We understand why, and perhaps how, when we learn that God’s work and God’s way are also blameless (Deut 32:4; Ps 18:30). This supports Jesus’ command to be perfect “as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). That is, to be “blameless” is something of an *imitatio dei*, for which, self-evidently, only God can give the ability.

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The Old Testament’s combination of “walk” or “way” with “blameless” is telling. To be blameless is not an abstract virtue, but it is a way of life, a calling to walk in the law of the Lord, as the parallelism makes clear in Ps 119:1:

Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD.

Similarly, “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God” (Gen 6:9); “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless’” (Gen 17:1). The same connections appear in Pss 15:2; 84:11; 101:2, 6. Obviously, the language is deliberate: to be blameless, whole, complete is to live and walk in the way of the Lord or “in the law of the Lord.” Matthew apparently agrees; following Jesus’ command to “be perfect (*τέλειος*),” the only other usage of that term in the Gospel comes in 19:21, where, too, it is associated with righteous acts and walking with Jesus: “Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’”

As all interpreters note, however, the “law of the LORD” in Ps 119 is not merely the commands of the Decalogue or the requirements of the ceremonial law. The psalm employs eight parallel terms to make its point about the “law,” and it uses these with roughly equal frequency (hardly accidental): “law” (25 times); “decrees” (23 times); “precepts” (21); “statutes” (21); “commandments” (22); “ordinances” (23); “word” or “words” (28); “promises” (19).

The last two, especially, make clear that the psalm means not at all to speak of “law” as opposed to “gospel” or to see the law as something arduous. This is the law

²⁷Note that while the Old Testament uniformly uses **בְּטָהוֹרָה** for “blameless,” the LXX and NT use three different terms: sometimes *τέλειος* (like Jesus in Matt 5:48), sometimes *ἄμωμος* (as with Aaron, Elizabeth, and Zechariah in these passages and with Paul in Phil 3:6), sometimes *ἁμωμος* (as in Eph 1:4). It seems unproductive to attempt to differentiate among the three Greek terms as they are used in this sense.

²⁸As these verses make clear, to be blameless is to be “completely loyal” to God (Deut 18:13 NRSV), both externally (Ps 15:2–5) and internally (Pss 15:2; 19:12–13).

or “word” that is “a lamp unto my feet” (119:105), “sweeter than honey in my mouth” (119:103). This is God’s whole revelation or teaching that tells me who I am and shows me the way of truth and life.²⁹ It is gift, pure and simple.

Intriguingly, for all of this, we learn nothing about the content of the laws, decrees, statutes, and commandments that the psalm extols, and little about the content of the promises and the word more broadly. We learn here what these things *do*, but not much about what they *are*. No laws are referred to directly in the psalm; but God’s law revives and strengthens (vv. 25, 28); it is good, and it provides comfort and life (vv. 39, 40, 50, 82, 93, 116). In the law there is liberty (v. 45), safety (v. 117), and peace (v. 165). Again, nothing accusatory here; indeed, precisely the opposite. To live within God’s teaching, God’s word, is to live in freedom.

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At the same time, there is no simplistic notion that walking in God’s law provides protection from all harm. The psalmist knows oppression and failure (vv. 71, 107, 134, 141, 143, 147, 150, 153, 161, 176) and precisely for that reason holds all the more firmly to God’s word, God’s torah. The psalmist does this because he knows who God is. “You are good and do good” (v. 68), and (quoting the Old Testament catechism), “Your faithfulness endures to all generations” (v. 90; cf. vv. 132, 156). This is as close as we get to providing content to the “word” and the “promises” that the psalm loves so passionately.

Perhaps part of the “delight” in the law will be the time spent remembering and enumerating all the specific laws and promises that God has spoken and will speak throughout Israel’s history. For now, it is enough to live confidently in the assurance that God means us well in all that God promises and commands.

Helmut Thielicke, too, recognized that “in Psalm 119 we find the direct opposite of what Paul has in mind when he says that the law accuses and judges. This Psalm...tells us how the consolation or the divine promise of the law leads us on to obedience, for when God comforts our hearts, we tread the way of his commandments.”³⁰

Ah, but is this blameless walking possible for mere mortals? Obviously, the Old Testament thinks it is, but so does the New. As we have seen, both Jesus and Paul call people to be “blameless” or “perfect.” Yet, they know, as well as does the Old Testament, that “There is no one who is righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10, paraphrasing Eccl 7:20). Again, what does this mean?

²⁹The Jewish Publication Society translation, in fact, translates every use of תּוֹרָה (torah, “law”) in Ps 119 as “teaching.”

³⁰Thielicke, *Evangelical Faith*, 207.

A closer look at the Old Testament uses of “blameless” makes clear that it is not talking about a state of perfection, reached once and for all, but a walk that is given to humans day by day. On the one hand, David claims to be blameless (Ps 18:23), but, as we know, this is the same David (as the Psalter portrays him) who will pour out his exquisite confession in Ps 51 (“Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight”; v. 4). The psalmist who calls the blameless “happy” in Ps 119:1 will confess at the end of the psalm, in a kind of negative inclusio following all the praise of and pleasure in the law, “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek out your servant” (119:176).

Another torah psalm helps us understand how this works. The latter part of Ps 19 contains its own inclusio, moving from “the law of the Lord is perfect” in v. 7 to “then I shall be blameless” (same root) in v. 13. But note the progression:

the law of the Lord is perfect	v. 7
the decrees of the Lord are sure	v. 7
the precepts of the Lord are right	v. 8
the commandment of the Lord is clear	v. 8
the fear of the Lord is pure	v. 9
the ordinances of the Lord are true	v. 9

But, whereas the laws and decrees are perfect, the human is not, at least not yet:

	by them is your servant warned	v. 11
	but who can detect their errors?	v. 12
so:	clear me from hidden faults	v. 12
	keep your servant from the insolent	v. 13
and only then:	then I shall be blameless	v. 13

In other words, the psalmist is not made blameless by his own effort, but by being “cleared” by God from his faults and protected from error by means of God’s teaching.

This protecting, teaching, enlightening, enlivening sense of torah is the psalmist’s joy and delight. That seems to be the purpose of the sheer length of Ps 119. It is an alphabetical acrostic, with eight verses for each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet (thus, its 176 verses), but it does not seem calculated or even logical in its development. I see it as something of a symphony to God’s law, which we do not exegete or figure out so much as simply sit back and let it roll over us, around us, and through us. It does its work precisely in its length and repetition. Some have suggested that this grand opus once closed an earlier version of the Psalter.³¹ Psalm 1 began with “Happy are those” whose “delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night” (vv. 1-2); Ps 119 closes the in-

³¹For example, Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 253.

clusio with its “Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD” (v. 1). If true, then the whole Psalter becomes a paean to and a guide for such meditation on the law, the instruction, the word, the promises of God.

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Such meditation *can* do its work, as the Psalter itself, Jesus, and Paul make clear. No sinlessness, to be sure, but walking blamelessly, for now, for today, in the life-giving law and word of God is possible because it is received as gift. God’s “steadfast love” appears seven (!) times in Ps 119, six of those in direct parallelism with one of the psalm’s eight terms for the law or word of God: “The earth, O LORD, is full of your steadfast love; teach me your statutes” (Ps 119:64; see also vv. 41, 76, 68, 124, 159).³²

The psalm’s “blameless” walk in the law, empowered by God’s steadfast love, brings us close to the New Testament’s eschatological understanding of being made “blameless” by the work of God in us through Christ that prepares us for the life to come:

He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless (τέλος) on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 1:8)

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless (ἀμέμπτως) at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thess 5:23)

But, with our “new” understanding of the Old Testament, it will be important to recognize that such a gracious and eschatological perspective is not seen only with the arrival of Jesus—though it may well be fulfilled there—but is anticipated and present already in the Old Testament, as the people of God walk in the law, the word, the promises that God provides to give them life.

As already noted, the influences on Paul in his world of Palestinian Judaism are many. But among them, certainly, are the understanding of God, God’s torah, and God’s word that we see here in Ps 119. Paul grew up reciting this psalm. In embracing Christ, Paul will not give up on this God, nor, for Paul, will this God give up on Israel. Paul is apparently able to understand and continue the faithful, confident, and “blameless” walk with God described in Ps 119, even as he proclaims the grace of God in Christ to all humankind, offering a salvation no longer bound by the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament and certainly not subject to an understanding of the law that is kept for the sake of gaining merit. No, it is all grace; but,

³²“Steadfast love” occurs also in v. 149, where it is not paired with a synonym for law.

for the record, Ps 119, too, knows that being “gracious” is God’s “custom toward those who love [God’s] name” (v. 132).

PSALM 119 IN THE PARISH

As worship planners, we are, I think, generally flummoxed by Ps 119. What are we to do with this immovable object or “massive mountain range”?³³ A reading between the lessons on Sunday morning can’t fully do justice to a psalm like this, though several stanzas do show up here and there in the propers according to *The Revised Common Lectionary*.³⁴

But for the psalm to do its work, to have its intended impact, we need to experience the whole thing, which will require letting it be the focus of, perhaps, a Service of the Word, a Lenten service (or series), or something like a retreat setting. Creative musicians and liturgists will find ways to use the psalm in responsive reading or song, but another effective option for this particular psalm may be “pouring” the words over the congregation by a careful and articulate reader (or readers). Frequent pauses would be appropriate, no doubt, for prayer, hymns, meditation, and perhaps homiletical interludes. Such homiletical commentary could be used to help Christian hearers appropriate the psalm without succumbing to legalistic interpretations.³⁵

Leaders might also spend some time attempting to help people appreciate the acrostic nature of the psalm by paraphrasing it into stanzas beginning with A, B, C, etc. (happily, with only twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, we can avoid the difficulties of Q, X, and Z). Then, for example, the first stanza might read something like:

All those whose way is blameless,
 who walk in the law of the LORD—happy are they.
All those who observe his decrees,
 who seek him wholeheartedly—happy are they.
Avoiding every wrongdoing,
 they walk in his ways.
Always to keep your precepts
 is your clear command.
Amen! May my ways be steadfast
 in keeping your statutes!
And I shall not be put to shame
 when I regard all your commandments.
An upright heart will speak your praise
 as I learn your righteous ordinances.

³³The latter is Claus Westermann’s term in his *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*, trans. Ralph D. Gehrke (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) 117.

³⁴Included quite appropriately in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is the choice of Ps 119:89–104 for commemorations of “Theologians and Teachers.”

³⁵These and other uses were all suggested by students in my spring 2010 Worship in Israel class as we worked on this psalm. Thanks to them for their ideas.

All your statutes I will keep;
do not utterly forsake me.³⁶

Do we not want to “treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you” (v. 11)? Do we not share the psalmist’s lament that “my soul clings to the dust,” thus appealing to God to “revive me according to your word” (v. 25)? Will we not confess with the psalmist that God’s word is “sweeter than honey to my mouth” and “a lamp to my feet” (vv. 103, 105)? Do we not long to come to the place where we can say: “Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble” (v. 165)? And as we await the fulfillment of a blameless walk, given to us by God in Christ, will we not say, “Let my cry come before you, O LORD; give me understanding according to your word” (v. 169)? All of that and more is offered us in Ps 119. We will do well to accept the gift. ⊕

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³⁶My paraphrase is built on several translations. No doubt, one could arrive at an even more felicitous paraphrase working directly from the Hebrew text.