

“The Wrong Side of the Tracks”

Insights from Psalms 119.1-16

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Introduction

The three most important words in real estate are, “location, location, location.” My wife and I discovered this recently as we looked for a house to buy. Many of the homes we could afford were located in neighborhoods with a lot of run-down houses. Since we intend to keep our house in good condition, we were concerned with being on “the right side of the tracks,” that is, locating in an area that would maintain its property value.

A similar concept applies to the spiritual realm. There is a “right side of the spiritual tracks” which we would do well to seek out. Psalms 119.1-16 addresses just this point. The key thought of the passage may be found in verses 9-11.

Biblical Text

- 1 Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD.
- 2 Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart.
- 3 They also do no iniquity: they walk in his ways.
- 4 Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts diligently.
- 5 O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes!
- 6 Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments.
- 7 I will praise thee with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned thy righteous judgments.
- 8 I will keep thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly.
- 9 Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word.
- 10 With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.
- 11 Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.
- 12 Blessed art thou, O LORD: teach me thy statutes.
- 13 With my lips have I declared all the judgments of thy mouth.
- 14 I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies, as much as in all riches.
- 15 I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways.
- 16 I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word.

Practical Lessons

This passage teaches at least four spiritual lessons:

1. *It is possible for the sincere believer to wander away from God.*
This reality was plain to the psalmist, who said, “O let me not wander from thy commandments” (v 10). It is also implied by his statements in verses 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, and 16. The psalmist understood that he could very easily fall into sin, even though he desired earnestly not to do so. The Hebrew word translated “wander” in verse 10 is used in Ezekiel 34:6 to describe how sheep go astray. A related term is used in Psalm 19.12 to refer to inadvertent sins.

Our susceptibility to wander should instill within us a healthy fear of going to “the wrong side of the tracks.” Personally, I am truly afraid of the course my life might take if I wandered far from God. This perception helps me to stay in the Lord’s will.

2. *The key to staying where God wants us is treasuring his Word.*

This principle is abundantly clear from the text. In fact, the entirety of Psalm 119 deals with the psalmist's relation to God's Word. The purifying and sanctifying powers of the Word are described specifically in verses 9 and 11: "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word. . . . Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee." By focusing on the Word of God, the psalmist believed he would refrain from iniquity (vv 1-3).

It has well been said of the Scriptures that "either they will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from them." Exposure to the revelation of God inhibits the progress of sin. This concept is clearly enunciated in 2 Timothy 3.16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." Ray Brinson once said that the Bible teaches us doctrine—what is right; reproof—what is wrong; correction—how to get right; and instruction in righteousness—how to stay right.

3. *Devotion to the Word of God requires a high level of commitment.*

Victory over sin comes only to those who "seek him with the whole heart" (v 2; see v 10). In the sixteen verses that comprise the text under consideration, ten duties to the laws of God are described: walking in them (vv 1, 3), keeping them (vv 2, 4, 5, 8), contemplating them (vv 6, 15), learning them (vv 7, 12), heeding them (v 9), storing them (v 11), declaring them (v 13), rejoicing in them (14), meditating on them (v 15), and delighting in them (v 16).

Clearly we need a high level of personal dedication to perform all these duties in relation to God's Word. Yet if we fail to do so, we make ourselves vulnerable to spiritual wandering. Our sinful nature ensures that we will end up on the wrong side of the tracks unless we exercise caution to remain in God's will. Therefore, it is imperative that we maintain an intimate knowledge of and love for the Scriptures.

4. *Blessings come to those who honor God's Word.*

There is an incentive to giving God's Word its due: God will bless us if we do so. "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD. Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart" (vv 1-2). All throughout the Scriptures, the promise is given that those who heed God's principles will reap blessings for doing so (cf. Mt 7.24-27; Jas 1.22-25). It has been my experience to observe that success and spiritual balance come to those who cultivate a daily relationship with God through his Word.

Conclusion

Psalms 119.1-16 teaches numerous truths that are of spiritual use to the believer. In the light of what we have discussed today, consider the following questions:

- Do you have a healthy fear of sinful behavior, or are you casually flirting with danger?
- Do you recognize, at least mentally, that consistently holy living can only come about through saturation with the Word of God?
- Are you making a reasonable effort to grow in your devotion to God's Word? What have you done in the last 24 hours? In the last week?
- Can you see God's blessings in your life—blessings which can be attributed to your loyal devotion to read and apply the Scriptures?

If your answer to any of these questions is "no," I urge you to repent and get on the right side of the tracks.