

“Dig into the Word”

Psalms 119:105-112

[title slide] *Welcome, opening prayer.*

[envelope] When I was in junior high, I wrote a lot of letters, especially to the friends I met at summer camp. How strange is it today, in our high-tech world, to write a good old-fashioned letter and actually lick the envelope seal? I never liked the taste of the glue! But those letters are so worth it. There is something about receiving a hand-written letter and sending one in return that can't compare to talking on the phone, or texting, or even video chatting.

My wife and I exchanged a fair amount of letters when we first were dating. It helped our relationship grow when there was a great distance between us. We could communicate our thoughts, hopes, and dreams to each other. Those letters and cards were precious, not because of the price of the paper and the stamp, but because of the value of the information inside of them.

Can you think of a personal letter or card that you have received? Have you considered the effort the other person put into writing it? I hope that you, like me, have received letters that made you feel great.

[Bible-rose] Today, as we talk about reading the Bible, I am going to be part preacher and part salesman. I want to tell you why we all should read the Bible. My pitch to you is this: The Bible is God's love letter to us. I want to persuade you to pick up God's Word, read it, and share it with someone else.

How many of you remember when you received your first Bible? I got mine in 3rd grade. I still have it. I've read it cover-to-cover several times, and highlighted verses that have been meaningful to me in life's challenges.

[Quiz] Here's a quick quiz: What is the longest chapter of the Bible? Psalm 119. Without looking, can anyone tell me how many verses there are in Psalm 119? I'll give you a hint: twenty-two times eight. (Not much of a hint, is it?) The answer is 176.

[alphabet] Psalm 119 is an acrostic love poem about God's law, based on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, 22 total. Each stanza is eight verses long, hence 22 times 8. The first stanza starts with the Hebrew letter Aleph (A), the

next stanza starts with the letter Beth (B), and so on, down to the 22nd and last stanza, which starts with Taw, the Hebrew equivalent of Z.

That’s a lot of words. Why would someone write a 176-verse poem?

[Shakespeare] An example from the late 1500’s might help us.¹ William Shakespeare was once in love with a woman and wrote sonnets to her like this:

*“Past cure am I, now reason is past care,
And frantic - mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madman's are,
At random from the truth vainly expressed;
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.”*

Sonnets are a very disciplined form of poetry, with exactly 14 rhyming lines and a particular rhythm (iambic pentameter, for any English majors in the room.) Who would take such “fevered emotion” and express them in such a strict way? Someone who was dedicated enough to find the best way to express his love, that’s who. Shakespeare was so in love with this woman, he realized, “Roses are red, violets are blue,” wouldn’t be enough.

[Psalm 119:1-2] In a similar fashion, the author wrote Psalm 119 using an acrostic to explain his love for God’s word.² One could say, Psalm 119 is a long, passionate poem about God’s law.³ It seems strange to us – after all, who writes love poetry about the IRS tax code? Not me! Yet it is obvious how much this writer loves God’s law. As you read, you realize just how hungry the psalmist was for God’s word.

[Psalm 119:105] Take, for example, verse 105, also one of the lines from an Amy Grant song, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet.” Have you ever been in a blackout and needed to find a light? Then you know how valuable a flashlight is when you are lost in the dark. That is one example of how much this psalmist loves God’s word – it is as precious to him as light itself.

¹ From the NIV Student Bible notes by Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford, Zondervan, 1996.

² Assuming the author was a man.

³ NIV Study Bible, 1996.

[Psalm 119 and 1 Cor 13] The psalmist knows that God’s word protects him. The writer admits he has suffered much, but God’s word preserves and restores his life. (verses 109-110.) God’s word protects the writer from himself and from his enemies, with a love reminiscent of 1st Corinthians 13:7. “[Love] always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

[Psalm 119:111] At the conclusion of this section of Psalm 119, the psalmist focuses on his heart, the center of his being. He calls God’s word “the joy of my heart” and promises that his “heart is set on keeping [God’s] decrees to the very end.” And this is just one small section of a masterpiece expressing his love and devotion for God’s word.

Do you love the God’s word, that much? I would hope all us in this room would say, “Yes, I do love the Bible.” Maybe you are not going to write a 176-line poem about it (although if you do, that’s great!), but I hope all of us will spend time reading, studying, memorizing and pondering God’s word.

[Bible Library] We should understand the Bible is not actually a singular book; it is a compilation of 66 books. (At least, the Protestant version is.) The Bible was written on three continents, by over 40 authors, over a period of about 1,500 years. It contains stories written in three languages that cover hundreds of controversial subjects. So the Bible is a very diverse library. And yet the Bible has one consistent message, from Genesis to Revelation: **God works to redeem humanity.** That is really amazing, and should motivate us to love and read God’s word.

[title slide] The Bible is full of truth, and we live in a world where people are hungry for answers to life’s problems. People are hungry for hope. People are hungry for love. People are hungry for kindness, freedom, and safety. I truly believe that through the Bible, God provides us with these things and more.

Despite these longings, we don’t all read God’s love letter enough. Part of our struggle is we often don’t know where to start. Reading the Bible feels like eating an elephant-it seems so huge! Well, the best way to start is simply to do it one bite at a time.

[comparison slide] Let me give you a comparison for thought. Many people have read the entire Harry Potter series, all 4,224 pages. The average

Bible has around 1,500 pages. The word count in whole Harry Potter series is over one million. The Bible’s word count, depending on the translation, is around 800,000. If you can read a series of novels that size, you can easily read the whole Bible. If you were to read about 3 chapters per day, you could read the entire Bible in one year.

[secret] When reading the Bible, you can go cover to cover if you want, but let me give you a secret: It’s OK to read from the back first. That’s a great way to start. Read the stories of Jesus first. Read the gospel of Mark; it is the shortest gospel and full of action. From there, you probably want to read the rest of the gospels, then Acts, and then the letters from Paul and the other apostles. Then, go back and read the great stories of the Old Testament – Genesis, Exodus, Samuel, and so forth. Sprinkle in readings from Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs (which, by the way, is a literal love letter!) Finally, examine the books of prophecy – all the Old Testament prophets and the book of Revelation.

It probably doesn’t matter what order you read the books of the Bible, as long as you do read them. The Bible was not meant to be read once and then put on the shelf to collect dust after you’re done. We should read the Bible again and again; it is the Living Word of God. Many times, you can read the same passage you have read before, and it will speak to you differently, because of something you have experienced. As you read, the Holy Spirit will reveal something new.

[God’s invitation] I may be acting like a salesman making my pitch to you; however it is really God who makes the pitch to all of us. God says, “Will you read my letter?” Take these verses for example:

Proverbs 8:1 and 11 – “Does not wisdom call out?...Wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.”

2nd Timothy 3:16-17 – “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Ephesians 6 tells us that God’s word is the sword of the spirit, helping us stand strong and resist the devil. (Ephesians 6:10-15) Really, who doesn’t want that kind of power?

Reading the Bible is something we call a “means of grace.” Through reading God’s word, you can know God’s will for your life. God gave us the Bible so that we can know his son, Jesus Christ, and have an intimate, loving relationship with him through the Holy Spirit.

[title slide] I implore you: Dig into God’s word. Get the free Bible app on your smart phone. Bookmark Biblegateway.com on your computer. Get a reading plan – there are thousands. Find one that works for you. Get a translation that is easy for you to read. We have free Bibles for anyone who wants one, complete NIV Bibles and amazing little books from the Gideon’s – the Book of Life, which is a copy of the gospel of Mark. We want everyone to have access to this amazing love letter from God. Learn to love the Bible. Don’t let it sit there collecting dust.

And one last thing: Read it slowly. Savor this love letter from God. It’s OK if you don’t understand everything you read – you can find study notes, commentaries, and other study helps. If you approach God’s word with an open heart and an open mind, you will find the Living Word does speak to you, and you will find light and direction for your path.

Let’s pray.

Memory verse:

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

Questions for reflection:

1. How often do you read the Bible and why?
2. What motivates (or should motivate) you to read the Bible? Do you expect to hear from God when you read it?
3. Who can help encourage you as you read your Bible? What study helps can you access to make it more understandable?
4. Whom do you know that would like to have their own Bible? Would you give them one?