

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Word That Lasts

Psalm 119:89-96

Caroline Campbell lives in Beaufort, South Carolina. When she was in her late teens, her father found some papers she had written, with Scripture copied word for word by hand. He suggested, on a whim, that she could do the whole Bible. And she did. It took her nine years to copy the Bible by hand. Beginning with Genesis and working her way through Revelation, she wrote down all 782,815 words from her 1973 New American Standard Bible. Caroline's mother estimates that the completed manuscript, compiled in 43 binders, is more than 10,000 pages long.

As you can imagine, Caroline, who has Down syndrome, has been an inspiration to many people, as well as an example of how individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities can be a vital part of the life of the church. Her devotion to Scripture was evident in how she spent about two hours a day transcribing, no matter where she was at. She noted that the longest and most challenging portion was the book of Psalms, with 150 chapters.¹

Today's text takes us to the longest chapter in the longest book of the Bible. Psalm 119 is written in the form of an acrostic poem. It has 176 verses, organized into 22 stanzas. Each stanza has eight lines, and begins with a separate letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Sometimes the beauty of the poetry gets lost in translation, but the focus of its content remains, namely, the value and importance of God's word. The message of Psalm 119 is actually captured by the verse immediately following today's text: "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long" (v. 97).

When we hear the word "law," we often connect it with legal matters, statutes, and courtroom proceedings. In a religious context, we frequently associate "law" with rules and regulations designed to promote holiness and righteousness. Granted, these are important aspects of "law." But here in Psalm 119, "law" involves much more than just rules regulating religious life. In this psalm, there's a nearly constant repetition of synonyms for "law," including "decrees," "ways," "precepts," "statutes," "commandments," "ordinances," "word," and "promise." All of these have to do with the guidance that God gives in order for his people to live in the way of blessing. In fact, the Hebrew term *Torah* essentially means "teaching" or "instruction." So Psalm 119 is an extended meditation on God's instruction, God's guiding word.

In the verses leading up to today's text, the psalmist gives voice to suffering. Three times he uses a verb that means "to fail," "to be finished," "to be spent." There's a sense of urgency as the psalmist pleads for help. He's essentially shouting to the Lord for relief, because he knows that the Lord can give life and comfort. The psalmist's suffering may be great, but he continues to live in hope.

So when we get to the beginning of our text, the psalmist starts to make a turn in emotions. His expression of descent turns into an expression of ascent. The psalmist's cry of suffering gives way to a profession of faith. "Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the

earth, and it endures" (vv. 98-90). In the Scriptures, that word "faithfulness" is often paired with the word "steadfast love" in order to communicate the way that God exercises sovereignty. In other words, God does so with love that issues in forgiveness. The bottom line is that the psalmist trusts that God is in control, working for reconciliation and restoration. And one of God's primary means of doing so is his word, his instruction. Just as God is eternal, so God's word is eternal. His love doesn't come and go, so neither does his teaching.

Five years ago, the English Standard Version, a popular Bible translation, received its final update, 17 years after it was first authorized by its publisher. The ESV contains more than 775,000 words across more than 31,000 verses. The final "permanent text" edition incorporated just 52 words across 29 verses. The board then voted to make the text "unchanged forever, in perpetuity." The Bible's publisher, Crossway, put it this way: "People who love the ESV Bible can have full confidence in the ESV, knowing that it will continue to be published, as is, without being changed, for the rest of their lives, and for generations to come."²

Crossway wasn't trying to claim that only the text of the ESV constitutes the unchanging word of God, as if to exclude other translations. That wasn't the point. The point was that the ESV wouldn't be going through any more revisions. God's words, as captured and conveyed by the ESV, would never change.

Around the same time that the ESV was receiving its final updates, an emoji Bible was released. It was billed as "Scripture 4 Millennials." It's essentially a King James Version of the Bible with 10 to 15 percent of the text swapped for emojis. Usually, about one or two symbols appear in each verse. For instance, God is depicted as a smiley face with a halo. Lord is depicted as a crown. Expressions of praise, blessing, or glory are depicted by raised hands. Words having to do with communication are depicted by a speech balloon or by a speaking head in silhouette. Scripture is depicted by an open book icon. If the psalmist were into emojis, all these would come in handy for today's text. Every verse would have either a smiley face with a halo, or an open book, or both, in it.

All our efforts to choose the right word, or pick the right icon, run up against the truth to which the psalmist testifies in the last verse of our text: "To all perfection I see a limit; but your commands are boundless" (v. 96). The meaning of the Hebrew term translated as "perfection" is difficult to capture. But it basically has to do with the contrast between mortal humans and an eternal God. As Eugene Peterson renders it: "I see the limits to everything human, but the horizons can't contain your commands!" All this brings us right back to where we most need to be, in a state of dependence upon God, relying upon the sovereign love of God. There's never a time when we are self-sufficient. We're always in need of God's teaching and instruction, God's word.

David Lawrence was once the editor of *U.S. News and World Report*. In an editorial written on May 5, 1956, he said:

It is a temporary answer to the threat of world disturbance that we face. The North Atlantic Treaty is temporary. The United Nations is temporary. All our alliances are temporary. Basically there is only one permanence we can all accept. It is the permanence of a God-governed world, for the power of God alone is permanent. Obedience to his laws is the only road to lasting solutions to man's problems.³

In the midst of hardships and challenges, the psalmist knows how to sort out what's lasting from what's passing. Today's text contains repeated references to the durability of God's word. "Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens" (v. 89). "Your faithfulness continues" (v. 90). "The earth ... endures" (v. 90). "Your laws endure" (91). "I

will never forget your precepts" (93). "Your commands are boundless" (v. 96). Knowing the difference between the temporary and the eternal is critical to living in proper relationship with the Lord and being truly alive.

A few years ago, Cesar Hidalgo, director of the Collective Learning group at the MIT Media Lab, joined his colleagues in a data-mining project to address the question: How do people and products drift out of the cultural picture? They used data from sources such as Billboard, Spotify, IMDB, Wikipedia, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, and the American Physical Society. Using mathematical models, they calculated the rate of decline of songs, people, and scientific papers. They found that, "The universal decay of collective memory and attention concludes that people and things are kept alive through 'oral communication' from about five to 30 years."⁴

Even the most prominent people, the most popular things, the most recognizable accomplishments, run up again the limits of time and memory. The mortality of our lives and our achievements stands in such contrast to the eternity of God and his purposes. As we hear in the prophet Isaiah, "All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever" (40:6b-8).

Through the pandemic experience of the past year and a half, we've had many opportunities to grow deeper into the truth of our mortality and the vulnerability of life. Things that we took for granted, things that we assumed would never change, things that we thought were here to stay, have proved to be much more bounded and fragile than we imagined. We've spent more time distinguishing between what's permanent and what's not.

In a 1977 commencement address at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, President Gerald Ford said:

More than a century ago, Abraham Lincoln told the story of an Eastern monarch who instructed his wise men to write a sentence to be always in view which would be true and appropriate in all circumstances and in all times. They presented him these words: "And this, too, shall pass away." Lincoln marveled at this very simple wisdom, how much it expresses, how chastening in the hour of pride, how consoling in the depths of affliction.⁵

"This too shall pass." You may have heard it said of many things in many different kinds of circumstances and situations. Reports indicate that in Christian bookstores selling face masks with faith messages, this was one of the popular expressions. "This too shall pass."

In the midst of a pandemic, and many other things, that will eventually pass, our hope is in the Lord whose word will never pass. "Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations."

¹ Adam Macinnis, "Nine Years, 782,000 Words Later, South Carolina Woman Completes Handwritten Bible." Christianity Today website. August 3, 2021. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/august/bible-handwritten-caroline-campbell-disability-down-syndrom.html> (August 4, 2021).

² Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "After Tweaking 29 Verses, Bible Translation Becomes Unchanging Word of God." Christianity Today website. September 9, 2016. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/september/after-tweaking-29-verses-bible-esv-english-standard-version.html> (August 4, 2021).

³ Quoted by Richard Halverson, "The Question Facing Us." Preaching Today, Tape 46.

⁴ Adapted from Kevin Berger, "How We'll Forget John Lennon," *Nautilus* (January 10, 2019).

⁵ "Gerald R. Ford: Lessons from the Presidency." Christianity Today website. December 27, 2006. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/decemberweb-only/152-32.0.html> (August 5, 2021). The article originally appeared in the July 29, 1977 issue of *Christianity Today*.