

Taking

WHY THE BIBLE IS KNOWABLE,

GOD

NECESSARY, AND ENOUGH, AND

At His

WHAT THAT MEANS FOR YOU AND ME

WORD

KEVIN DeYOUNG

Taking God At His Word: Why the Bible Is Knowable, Necessary, and Enough, and What That Means for You and Me

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Believing, Feeling, Doing

My soul keeps your testimonies; I love them exceedingly.

PSALM 119:167

This book begins in a surprising place: with a love poem.

Don't worry, it's not from me. It's not from my wife. It's not from a card, a movie, or the latest power ballad. It's not a new poem or a short poem. But it is most definitely a love poem. You may have read it before. You may have sung it, too. It's the longest chapter in the longest book in the longest half of a very long collection of books. Out of 1,189 chapters scattered across 66 books written over the course of two millennia, Psalm 119 is the longest.¹

And for good reason.

This particular psalm is an acrostic. There are 8 verses in each stanza, and within each stanza the 8 verses begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So verses 1–8 all begin with *aleph*, verses 9–16 with *beth*, verses 17–24 with

¹Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible by any definition (if we care to look at chapters, which, we should remember, aren't inspired divisions). Determining the longest book of the Bible is a little trickier. Psalms is the longest book of the Bible if you count chapters or verses. It also takes up the most pages in our English Bibles. But since chapters, verses, and page numbers are not a part of the original manuscripts, scholars have come up with other ways to determine the length of an individual book. Depending on the means of calculation, Jeremiah, Genesis, and Ezekiel may be longer than Psalms.

gimel, and on and on for 22 stanzas and 176 verses—all of them exultant in their love for God’s word. In 169 of these verses, the psalmist makes some reference to the word of God. Law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, rules, promises, word—this language appears in almost every verse, and often more than once in the same verse. The terms have different shades of meaning (e.g., what God wants, or what God appoints, or what God demands, or what God has spoken), but they all center on the same big idea: God’s revelation in words.

Surely it is significant that this intricate, finely crafted, single-minded love poem—the longest in the Bible—is not about marriage or children or food or drink or mountains or sunsets or rivers or oceans, but about the Bible itself.

The Poet’s Passion

I imagine many of us dabbled in poetry way back when. You know, years before you had kids, before you got engaged, or, if you’re young enough, before last semester. I’ve written a few poems in my day, and even if we were best friends I still wouldn’t show them to you. I’m not embarrassed by the subject matter—writing for and about my lovely bride—but I doubt the form is anything to be proud of. For most of us, writing a love poem is like making cookies with wheat germ—it’s supposed to be the real thing but doesn’t taste quite right.

Some love poems are amazing, like Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116: “Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments. Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds,” and all that jazz. Beautiful. Brilliant. Breathtaking.

Other poems, not so much. Like this poem I found online by a man reliving his teenage romantic genius:

Look! There's a lonely cow
Hay! Cow!
If I were a cow, that would be me
If love is the ocean, I'm the Titanic.
Baby I burned my hand on
The frying pan of our love
But still it feels better
Than the bubble gum that hold us together
Which you stepped on

Words fail, don't they? Both in commenting on the poem and in the poem itself. Still, this bovine- and bubble gum-themed piece of verbal art does more with subtlety and imagery than the entry entitled "Purse of Love":

Girl you make me
Brush my teeth
Comb my hair
Use deodorant
Call you
You're so swell

I suppose this poem may capture a moment of real sacrifice for our high school hero. But whatever the earnestness of intention, it is strikingly bad poetry. Most poems written when we are young and in love feel, in retrospect—how shall we say?—a bit awkward. This is partly because few teenagers are instinctively good poets. It's about as common as cats being instinctively friendly. But the other reason our old love poems can be painful to read is that we find ourselves

uncomfortable with the exuberant passion and extravagant praise. We think, “Yikes! I sound like a nineteen-year-old in love. I can’t believe I was so over-the-top. Talk about melodramatic!” It can be embarrassing to get reacquainted with our earlier unbounded enthusiasm and unbridled affection, especially if the relationship being praised never worked out or if the love has since grown cold.

I wonder if we read a poem like Psalm 119 and feel a bit of the same embarrassment. I mean, look at verses 129–136, for example:

Your testimonies are wonderful;
 therefore my soul keeps them.
The unfolding of your words gives light;
 it imparts understanding to the simple.
I open my mouth and pant,
 because I long for your commandments.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
 as is your way with those who love your name.
Keep steady my steps according to your promise,
 and let no iniquity get dominion over me.
Redeem me from man’s oppression,
 that I may keep your precepts.
Make your face shine upon your servant,
 and teach me your statutes.
My eyes shed streams of tears,
 because people do not keep your law.

This is pretty emotional stuff—panting, longing, weeping streams of tears. If we’re honest, it sounds like high school love poetry on steroids. It’s passionate and sincere, but a

little unrealistic, a little too dramatic for real life. Who actually feels this way about commandments and statutes?

Finishing at the Start

I can think of three different reactions to the long, repetitive passion for the word of God in Psalm 119.

The first reaction is, “Yeah, right.” This is the attitude of the skeptic, the scoffer, and the cynic. You think to yourself, “It’s nice that ancient people had such respect for God’s laws and God’s words, but we can’t take these things too seriously. We know that humans often put words in God’s mouth for their own purposes. We know that every ‘divine’ word is mixed with human thinking, redaction, and interpretation. The Bible, as we have it, is inspiring in parts, but it’s also antiquated, indecipherable at times, and frankly, incorrect in many places.”

The second reaction is “Ho, hum.” You don’t have any particular problems with honoring God’s word or believing the Bible. On paper, you have a high view of the Scriptures. But in practice, you find them tedious and usually irrelevant. You think to yourself, though never voicing this out loud, “Psalm 119 is too long. It’s boring. It’s the worst day in my Bible reading plan. The thing goes on forever and ever saying the same thing. I like Psalm 23 much better.”

If the first reaction is “Yeah, right” and the second reaction is “Ho, hum,” the third possible reaction is “Yes! Yes! Yes!” This is what you cry out when everything in Psalm 119 rings true in your head and resonates in your heart, when the psalmist perfectly captures your passions, your affections, and your actions (or at least what you want them

to be). This is when you think to yourself, “I love this psalm because it gives voice to the song in my soul.”

The purpose of this book is to get us to fully, sincerely, and consistently embrace this third response. I want all that is in Psalm 119 to be an expression of all that is in our heads and in our hearts. In effect, I’m starting this book with the conclusion. Psalm 119 is the goal. I want to convince you (and make sure I’m convinced myself) that the Bible makes no mistakes, can be understood, cannot be overturned, and is the most important word in your life, the most relevant thing you can read each day. Only when we are convinced of all this can we give a full-throated “Yes! Yes! Yes!” every time we read the Bible’s longest chapter.

Think of this chapter as application and the remaining seven chapters of this book as the necessary building blocks so that the conclusions of Psalm 119 are warranted. Or, if I can use a more memorable metaphor, think of chapters 2 through 8 as seven different vials poured into a bubbling cauldron and this chapter as the catalytic result. Psalm 119 shows us what to believe about the word of God, what to feel about the word of God, and what to do with the word of God. That’s the application. That’s the chemical reaction produced in God’s people when we pour into our heads and hearts the sufficiency of Scripture, the authority of Scripture, the clarity of Scripture, and everything else we will encounter in the remaining seven chapters. Psalm 119 is the explosion of praise made possible by an orthodox and evangelical doctrine of Scripture. When we embrace everything the Bible says about itself, then—and only then—will we believe what we should believe about the word of God, feel what we should feel, and do with the word of God what we ought to do.

What Should I Believe about the Word of God?

In Psalm 119 we see at least three essential, irreducible characteristics we should believe about God's word.

First, God's word says what is true. Like the psalmist, we can trust in the word (v. 42), knowing that it is altogether true (v. 142). We can't trust everything we read on the Internet. We can't trust everything we hear from our professors. We certainly can't trust all the facts given by our politicians. We can't even trust the fact-checkers who check those facts! Statistics can be manipulated. Photographs can be faked. Magazine covers can be airbrushed. Our teachers, our friends, our science, our studies, even our eyes can deceive us. But the word of God is entirely true and always true:

- God's word is firmly fixed in the heavens (v. 89); it doesn't change.
- There is no limit to its perfection (v. 96); it contains nothing corrupt.
- All God's righteous rules endure forever (v. 160); they never get old and never wear out.

If you ever think to yourself, "I need to know what is true—what is true about me, true about people, true about the world, true about the future, true about the past, true about the good life, and true about God," then come to God's word. It teaches only what is true: "Sanctify them in the truth," Jesus said; "your word is truth" (John 17:17).

Second, God's word demands what is right. The psalmist gladly acknowledges God's right to issue commands and humbly accepts that all these commands are right. "I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous," he says (Ps. 119:75).

All God's commandments are sure (v. 86). All his precepts are right (v. 128). I sometimes hear Christians admit that they don't like what the Bible says, but since it's the Bible they have to obey it. On one level, this is an admirable example of submitting oneself to the word of God. And yet, we should go one step further and learn to see the goodness and rightness in all that God commands. We should love what God loves and delight in whatever he says. God does not lay down arbitrary rules. He does not give orders so that we might be restricted and miserable. He never requires what is impure, unloving, or unwise. His demands are always noble, always just, and always righteous.

Third, God's word provides what is good. According to Psalm 119, the word of God is the way of happiness (vv. 1–2), the way to avoid shame (v. 6), the way of safety (v. 9), and the way of good counsel (v. 24). The word gives us strength (v. 28) and hope (v. 43). It provides wisdom (vv. 98–100, 130) and shows us the way we should go (v. 105). God's verbal revelation, whether in spoken form in redemptive history or in the covenantal documents of redemptive history (i.e., the Bible), is unfailingly perfect. As the people of God, we believe the word of God can be trusted in every way to speak what is true, command what is right, and provide us with what is good.

What Should I Feel about the Word of God?

Too often, Christians reflect on only what they should believe about the word of God. But Psalm 119 will not let us stop there. This love poem forces us to consider how we feel about the word of God. We see that the psalmist has three fundamental affections for God's word.

First, he delights in it. Testimonies, commandments, law—they are all his delight (vv. 14, 24, 47, 70, 77, 143, 174). The psalmist can't help but speak of God's word in the deepest emotive language. The words of Scripture are sweet like honey (v. 103), the joy of his heart (v. 111), and positively wonderful (v. 129). "My soul keeps your testimonies," writes the psalmist; "I love them exceedingly" (v. 167).

But some people say, "I will never love the word of God like this. I'm not an intellectual. I don't listen to sermons all day. I don't read all the time. I'm not the sort of person who delights in words." That may be true as a general rule, but I'll bet there are times you get passionate about words on a page. We all pay attention when the words we are hearing or reading are of great benefit to us, like a will or an acceptance letter. We can read carefully when the text before us warns of great danger, like instructions on an electrical panel. We delight to read stories about us and about those we love. We love to read about greatness, beauty, and power. Do you see how I've just described the Bible? It's a book with great benefit to us, and one with grave warnings. It is a book about us and those we love. And most of all, it's a book that brings us face-to-face with One who possesses all greatness, beauty, and power. To be sure, the Bible can feel dull at times, but taken as a whole it is the greatest story ever told, and those who know it best are usually those who delight in it most.

Over and over, the psalmist professes his great love for the commands and testimonies of God (vv. 48, 97, 119, 127, 140). The flip side of this love is the anger he experiences when God's word is not delighted in. Hot indignation seizes him because of the wicked, who forsake God's law (v. 53). Zeal consumes him when his foes forget God's words (v. 139).

The faithless and disobedient he looks upon with disgust (v. 158). The language may sound harsh to us, but that's an indication of how little we treasure the word of God. How do you feel when someone fails to see the beauty you see in your spouse? Or when people don't see what makes your special-needs child so special? We are all righteously indignant when someone else holds in little esteem what we know to be precious. Extreme delight in someone or something naturally leads to extreme disgust when others consider that person or thing not worthy of their delight. No one who truly delights in God's word will be indifferent to the disregarding of it.

Second, he desires it. I count at least six times where the psalmist expresses his longing to keep the commands of God (vv. 5, 10, 17, 20, 40, 131). I count at least fourteen times when he expresses a desire to know and understand the word of God (vv. 18, 19, 27, 29, 33, 34, 35, 64, 66, 73, 124, 125, 135, 169). It's true for all of us: our lives are animated by desire. It's what literally gets us up in the morning. Desire is what we dream about, what we pray about, and what we think about when we are free to think about whatever we want to think about. Most of us have strong desires related to marriage, children, grandchildren, jobs, promotions, houses, vacations, revenge, recognition, and on and on. Some desires are good; some are bad. But consider, in that jumble of longings and passions, how strong is your desire to know and to understand and to keep the word of God? The psalmist so desired the word of God that he considered suffering to be a blessing in his life if it helped him become more obedient to God's commands (vv. 67–68, 71).

Third, he depends on it. The psalmist is constantly aware of his need for the word of God. "I cling to your testimonies,

O LORD; let me not be put to shame!” (v. 31). He is desperate for the encouragement found in God’s promise and rules (v. 50, 52). There are a lot of things we want in life, but there are few things we really need. The word of God is one of those things. In Amos’s day the most severe punishment to fall on the people of God was a “famine . . . of hearing the words of the LORD” (Amos 8:11). There is no calamity like the silence of God. We cannot know the truth or know ourselves or know God’s ways or savingly know God himself unless God speaks to us. Every true Christian should feel deep in his bones an utter dependence on God’s self-revelation in the Scriptures. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4).

What we believe and feel about the word of God are absolutely crucial, if for no other reason than that they should mirror what we believe and feel about Jesus. As we’ll see, Jesus believed unequivocally all that was written in the Scriptures. If we are to be his disciples, we should believe the same. Just as importantly, the New Testament teaches that Jesus is the word made flesh, which means (among other things) that all the attributes of God’s verbal revelation (truth, righteousness, power, veracity, wisdom, omniscience) will be found in the person of Christ. All that the psalmist believed and felt about the words from God is all that we should feel and believe about the Word of God incarnate. Our desire, delight, and dependence on the words of Scripture do not grow inversely to our desire, delight, and dependence on Jesus Christ. The two must always rise together. The most mature Christians thrill to hear every love poem that speaks about the Word made flesh *and* every love poem that celebrates the words of God.

What Should I Do with the Word of God?

The goal of this book is to get us believing what we should about the Bible, feeling what we should about the Bible, *and* to get us doing what we ought to do with the Bible. Given all that we've seen about the psalmist's faith in the word and passion for the word, it's no surprise that Psalm 119 is filled with action verbs illustrating the Spirit-prompted uses for the word:

- we sing the word (v. 172)
- speak the word (vv. 13, 46, 79)
- study the word (vv. 15, 48, 97, 148)
- store up the word (vv. 11, 93, 141)
- obey the word (vv. 8, 44, 57, 129, 145, 146, 167, 168)
- praise God for the word (vv. 7, 62, 164, 171)
- and pray that God would act according to his word (vv. 58, 121–123, 147, 149–152, 153–160)

These actions are no substitute for proper faith and affection, but they are the best indicators of what we really believe and feel about the word. Sing, speak, study, store up, obey, praise, and pray—this is how men and women of God handle the Scriptures. Now don't panic if you seem to fall short in believing, feeling, and doing. Remember, Psalm 119 is a love poem, not a checklist. The reason for starting with Psalm 119 is that this is where we want to end. This is the spiritual reaction the Spirit should produce in us when we fully grasp all that the Bible teaches about itself. My hope and prayer is that in some small way the rest of this book will help you say "Yes!" to what the psalmist believes, "Yes!" to what he feels, and "Yes!" to everything he does with God's holy and precious word.

A Few Final Clarifications

Before diving into the rest of the book, it might be helpful to know what type of book you are reading. While I hope this volume will motivate you to read the Bible, this is not a book on personal Bible study or principles for interpretation. Nor do I attempt an apologetic defense of Scripture, though I hope you will trust the Bible more for having read these eight chapters. This is not an exhaustive book, covering all the philosophical, theological, and methodological territory you might see in a fat, multivolume textbook. This is not an academic book with lots of footnotes. This is not a “take down” book where I name names and cite “chapter and verse” for current errors. This is not a groundbreaking work in exegetical, biblical, historical, or systematic theology.

“So what is this book?” you ask yourself, wondering how you managed to pick up such a know-nothing volume.

This is a book unpacking what the Bible says about the Bible. My aim is to be simple, uncluttered, straightforward, and manifestly biblical. I make no pretenses about offering you anything other than a doctrine of Scripture derived from Scripture itself. I know this raises questions about canon (how do you know you have the right Scriptures in the first place?) and questions about circular reasoning (how can you reference the Bible to determine the authority of the Bible?). These are reasonable questions, but they need not hold us up here. Both questions have to do with first principles, and a certain form of circularity is unavoidable whenever we try to defend our first principles. You can’t establish the supreme authority of your supreme authority by going to some other lesser authority. Yes, the logic is circular, but no more so

than the secularist defending reason by reason or the scientist touting the authority of science based on science. This doesn't mean Christians can be irrational and unreasonable in their views, but it does mean our first principle is neither rationality nor reason. We go the Bible to learn about the Bible because to judge the Bible by any other standard would be to make the Bible less than what it claims to be. As J. I. Packer wrote more than fifty years ago when facing similar challenges, "Scripture itself is alone competent to judge our doctrine of Scripture."²

There are many good books, some accessible and some technical, that thoughtfully explain and defend the canon of Scripture and the reliability of Scripture. I've listed several of them in the appendix. If you have doubts about how the books of the Bible proved to be self-authenticating, or doubts about the historical accuracy of the Bible, or doubts about the ancient biblical manuscripts, by all means study the issues for yourself. The claims of orthodox Christianity have no reason to avoid hard evidence and nothing to fear from a detailed examination of the facts.

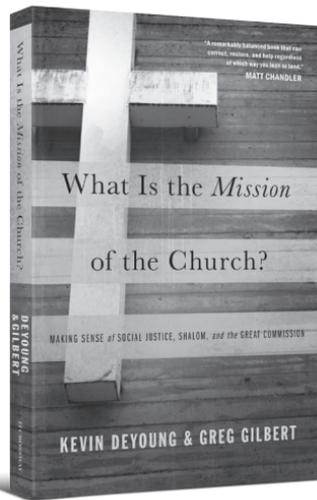
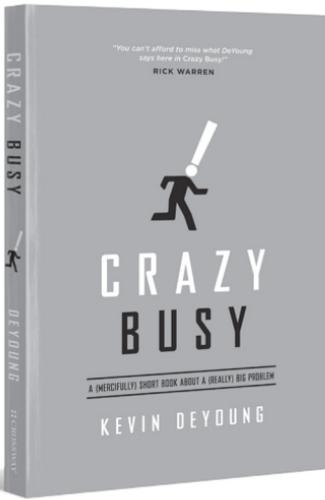
But my conviction, born out of experience and derived from the teaching of Scripture itself, is that the most effective means for bolstering our confidence in the Bible is to spend time in the Bible. The Holy Spirit is committed to working through the word. God promises to bless the reading and teaching of his word. The sheep will hear their Master's voice speaking to them in the word (cf. John 10:27). In other words, the word of God is more than enough to accomplish the work of God in the people of God. There is no better way

²J. I. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 76.

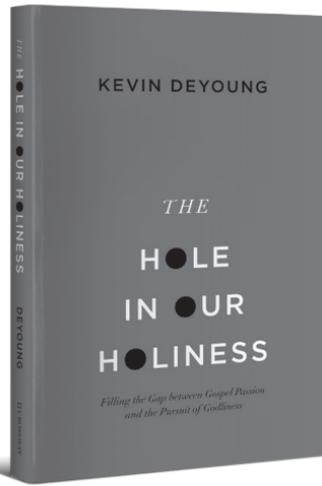
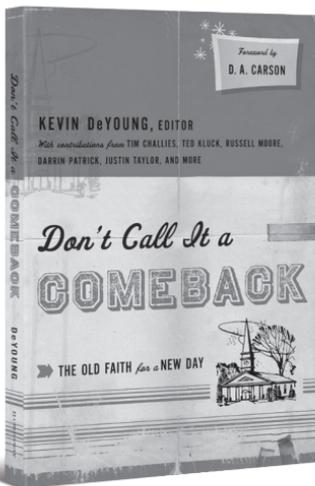
to understand and come to embrace a biblical doctrine of Scripture than to open the cage and let Scripture out.

If you've read this far, you probably have some interest in knowing the Bible better. You probably have some background in the Bible or have been directed here by someone who does. You may come with skepticism or full of faith, with ignorance needing to be remedied or with knowledge eager to be sharpened. Whatever the case, I trust, now that you know what kind of book this is, you'll be better prepared to benefit from it. And if you benefit from anything in these pages, it will be not because I've done anything wonderful, but because it is life-changing to come face-to-face with the world's most wonderful book.

May God give us ears, for we all need to hear the word of God more than God needs any of us to defend it.



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