

## A Psalm for the New Year

Psalm 119:33-40

Sunday, January 4, 2026

Around Thanksgiving, I decided it was time for a new Bible. My previous copy served me well for a long time. In fact, I was reluctant to start over with a new Bible because I had so many notes in the margins. What ultimately led me to upgrade was that the font size in my old Bible was getting harder to read. So, I decided to purchase a large print Bible. This one is more bulky and heavy, but I appreciate that I don't have to squint to read the text anymore. Now I'm excited to start the new year with fresh pages and empty margins as I dig into God's word in 2026.

What about you? Whether you received a new Bible for Christmas or you have a copy of the Scriptures that you've owned for decades, the new year is a great time to recommit to reading and studying God's word. Don't think of it so much as making a New Year's resolution. Instead, as we flip the calendar to 2026, this may be an opportunity to renew our commitment as deeply devoted followers of Jesus to reading and studying the Bible.

Turn with me to the passage that was read for us, Psalm 119:33-40. As you're turning there, or as you're pulling up the passage on your phone, let me take a moment to also encourage you in this new year to be in the habit of bringing your Bible with you to church. Yes, I know it's one more thing to keep track of as you head out the door on Sunday morning. As you grab your phone, your keys, and your coffee, stick your Bible under your arm or in your bag as you leave for church. We'll always have copies available for you to use in the back of the sanctuary, but it's good to have your own copy of the Scriptures open on your lap.

If you don't own a Bible, or you would like some suggestions about purchasing a new one, I would love to visit with you, or you can speak with one of our elders, and we will help point you in the right direction. Parents, if you're looking for a recommendation for a Bible for your kids or teen, Amy Graf, Pastor Shane, or I would love to help find one that's a good fit for them.

You'll notice as you turn to Psalm 119 that it is a long passage of Scripture—it's 176 verses. Don't worry. I don't plan to preach through 176 verses this morning. We're only going to look at verses 33-40 today. Depending on the format of the Bible you have in front of you, you might also notice that Psalm 119 is divided into sections. Each section begins with a heading indicated by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

In the original Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, each section of eight verses begins with a corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So, for example, each line of verses 1-8, in Hebrew, begins with the letter *aleph*, verses 9-16 begin with the letter *beth*, and so on. Our passage, verses 33-40, all begin with the letter *he* in Hebrew. None of that carries over into English, so for our purposes, it's more of a curious fact that displays the psalmist's creativity.

When you sit down and read through Psalm 119 in its entirety (which I would encourage you to do sometime), you also notice that there is really one primary theme that runs from verse 1 to verse 176. We might call this psalm a poetic tribute to God's word.

That this passage is a poem, part of the Psalms, helps us to know how best to read it. Although Psalm 119 has much to teach us about God's word, this passage is not a doctrinal exposition. It's not like what we might find in Romans. Nor is there a narrative here similar to what we've seen in our study of Luke's Gospel.

We should read Psalm 119 not only as a poetic expression of the psalmist's praise for the written word of God, but also as a song of worship to the one who has revealed himself in the pages of Scripture. This Psalm is more than an expression of the writer's affection for Scripture. Psalm 119 is an exclamation of praise to the Author of Scripture.

With all that background in mind, what I want to do in the time remaining is to make a few observations from this text and then offer us some encouragement as we enter 2026 and renew our commitment to reading and studying God's word together. Let's begin by taking a closer look at verses 33-40.

Notice first of all how each line of this section begins: For example, "Teach me" (v. 33), "Give me" (v. 34), "Direct me" (v. 35), and so on. What we have is a series of petitions that are addressed to God as the psalmist reflects on God's word. Look again with me at verses 33-35. He says,

"Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end. Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight" (Psa. 119:33-35, NIV).

As is true of the rest of Psalm 119, and really of the Psalms all together, what we have here is a prayer. We can imagine the psalmist approaching the Scriptures in whatever format he had available to him in an attitude of prayer. He's addressing these petitions to God through prayer.

His intention in reading the Bible was not simply to study the text and mine its content for further information. His desire was to bring his heart and mind into alignment with what God had said in his word. And he knew that apart from God's help, he could not do what the Lord required of him on his own. So he petitions the LORD, "Teach me, ...give me understanding, ...direct me."

I appreciate how the NET Bible translates verse 33:

"Teach me, O LORD, *the lifestyle* prescribed by your statutes, so that I might observe it continually" (Psa. 119:33, NET).

Certainly, in our study of the Scriptures, the very first step is to correctly interpret what the text means and what the biblical author writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit originally intended us to see. Before we can make any application, observation, and interpretation must first take place.

But notice that the psalmist doesn't stop with study and interpretation. His desire was not only to understand what the Scriptures meant, but he also wanted to be able to bring God's word to

bear on his daily decision-making. His prayer was that God would shape his *lifestyle* according to the patterns and prescriptions he found in the Bible.

This is such a key picture of what discipleship is all about. When we read and study the Bible together or on our own, the first step is to get to the *what*. What does this passage teach? What does this text mean? Disciples first learn the *what*, but then they need to pursue the *so what*.

He says, "Teach me," what? "Teach me, LORD, ...your decrees." But not just God's decrees, he says, "Teach me, LORD, *the way* of your decrees." Teach me the lifestyle of a disciple.

Why? For what purpose? The psalmist says, "[so] that I may follow [your way] to the end." Lord, teach me what is right, and how to do what is right, so that I live this way forever.

The psalmist wasn't merely looking to become a better rule-follower. Obedience in itself wasn't his objective. Notice the repeated pronoun "your" that runs through this passage in reference to the LORD. These are *your* decrees, LORD, *your* law, and *your* commands. The psalmist's primary desire was to know the author of the Scriptures, not merely its content.

Let's pause here and make a couple of applications. This year, as you come to Scriptures, let me encourage you to do so prayerfully and with a teachable spirit.

**First, let's commit**, as we begin a new year, **to reading and studying the Scriptures prayerfully**. I imagine that many of us already begin with a word of prayer or close with a word of prayer when we read our Bibles. Let's be a church that not only opens and closes with prayer, but whenever we gather with our Life Groups, attend a Sunday School class, participate in a men's or women's Bible study, or prepare to hear a sermon, let's pray together and ask the author of the Bible to instruct us and direct us in our discipleship. When we pray through our list of petitions for family, good health, and God's provision, let's be sure to ask him as well for the things we read about in this passage. I guarantee you that this is a prayer God loves to answer.

Whenever you have your Bible open, ask the Lord to take what you're reading, studying, or hearing, and allow it to work its way into your heart and mind. Ask God to not only teach you, but also to teach you the way of his word, so that you might live in conformity to his ways and his will for the rest of your life. Pray that he would give you true understanding, so that it produces whole-hearted obedience in you. Petition him not only for learning, but that these things might shape and form your lifestyle. So, read and study Scripture prayerfully.

**But second, let's also commit to reading and studying the Scriptures with a teachable spirit.**

I must confess that I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with Bible Reading Plans and Daily Devotionals. These are resources I often recommend. On the one hand, I know personally that having some kind of a plan—whether it's a book of daily devotions, a read through the Bible checklist, or a pre-determined section of Scripture—these resources are tremendously helpful for keeping me accountable and keeping me on task with regular time in God's word.

However, as one who is wired to be a box-checker and rule-follower, I know I can easily complete a day's reading without feeling very engaged with the text. I can be more focused on getting it done and not missing a reading than on the reading itself. Depending on the section of Scripture I am reading for that day, the passage might not have the same resonance in my heart as on other days. It might be harder to understand or more difficult to find a direct application. And if I'm tired, I'm feeling off, or if I'm distracted by other thoughts, my time in God's word can feel like a very empty exercise.

Let me assure you that Daily Devotionals and Bible Reading Plans are wonderful resources for daily discipleship. In fact, every January, we include links to a variety of Bible Reading Plans on our church website. I would encourage you to check those out if you're looking for such a resource. But these are merely tools.

What matters is the attitude of our hearts when we come to God's word. When we pray and ask the Lord to teach us from his word, do we really expect him to answer? Are our hearts ready to receive his instruction, encouragement, correction, or even rebuke when we take in a passage? If Bible reading or Bible study is just another item on the day's to-do list, it will be of little discipleship benefit. So, as we begin the new year, and whatever resources you utilize to direct your Bible reading, ask the Lord to help you adopt a teachable spirit whenever you come to the Scriptures.

With that prayerful and teachable attitude in mind, look with me now at verses 35-37. The psalmist prays,

"Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word" (Psa. 119:35-37, NIV).

The psalmist is well aware of the natural tendencies of his sinful heart. He recognizes that his heart is bent toward selfishness and not toward the things of God. He doesn't need to be reminded that his eyes tend to crave things that are ultimately worthless, and that earthly things can easily become the object of his worship. He knows what's wrong with him.

It is because he knows where he is weak that the psalmist prays and asks the LORD to "direct [him]," to "turn [his] heart" in the Lord's direction, and to "turn [his] eyes away from worthless things." He wants to want what is good, but his flesh wants what is not. So he needs God's help.

You might be the kind of person who has the strength of pure willpower to make and keep New Year's resolutions. Most people aren't that way. I don't mean to be a pessimist, but very few people can actually keep the diet, follow the exercise plan, or break the bad habit they resolve to do at the beginning of January.

The same is often true of self-interested behavior, selfish habits, and sinful thoughts. Willpower and resolve are never strong enough to bring our hearts in line with God's will. We are wholly dependent on God to not only teach us what righteousness looks like, but we also depend on

him to bring about spiritual transformation within us, in order to live in obedience to his word. Again, when we ask our Heavenly Father for help, this is a prayer God loves to answer. Let's confess our inability and rely on his ability. But, how do we do that?

Along with the psalmist in verse 35, let's ask the Lord to transform the things we *delight* in. That word "delight" can also be translated as "to take pleasure in."

I hope you got some good stuff for Christmas this year. My Christmas list is pretty much the same every year. When my family asks me what I want, I tell them I only need books and coffee. I appreciate any gift I receive, but I *delight* in books and coffee. I love paging through a new book in anticipation of reading it. I love holding a bag of coffee beans up to my face and inhaling the aroma. Simple pleasures, but these are the things I really enjoy.

The psalmist's prayer is that he would find *pleasure* or *delight* in walking the path of obedience with the Lord. This helps us to see that victory over sin comes when we find greater pleasure or delight in obeying our Creator rather than gratifying our own selfish desires. That is a prayer we can bring before the Lord daily. We can ask him to renew our passions, kill selfishness, and transform our affections. In the Scriptures, we can discover godly delight.

Another way we can do this is by asking God to help us identify the objects of our worship. The word "worthless," found in verse 37, can also mean *empty* or *vain*. It is used to describe something that holds no true value.

My family will tell you that another one of my guilty pleasures is my baseball card collection. Unfortunately, there were no baseball cards under the tree or in my stocking this year. I've got tons of cards in our basement from when I was a kid. The most frequent question I get is, "What are they worth?" My cards from the 80s and 90s, especially in their rough condition, really aren't worth much more than the cardboard they're printed on. They are relatively *worthless*.

The psalmist is asking God to turn his focus away from the worthless things that capture his attention, but ultimately offer his life no real value. His prayer is that God would redirect his heart toward a life worthy of the Lord.

It is good to regularly ask ourselves questions like, "What things are currently capturing my attention? To what do I assign worth and worship? What are the objects of my delight and pleasure, and do they bring me life, or are they drawing me away from life in Christ?"

When we prayerfully adopt this posture of humility modeled in these verses, Scripture can help us to identify the things that capture our hearts. Not only that, but God's word can also help us to discover why it is that we find ourselves running after such things.

A few weeks ago, in our Friday morning Men's Discipleship study, I was struck by a comment that has since stuck with me. In the message we were listening to, the speaker was addressing the subject of confession of sin. If I remember correctly, the speaker said something like, "Confession is not only admitting to God what we've done, but also admitting to him *why* we

did it." That might not be exactly how he worded it, but his point was that pinpointing the motivating desire behind a particular sin was as important as acknowledging the sin itself. In other words, as we come to Scripture, we can ask God to help us to identify our misplaced delights and the worthless things that capture our attention.

Truly, the first Sunday in January is in many ways just another Sunday. And yet, with the start of the new year, perhaps this is the opportunity for some of us to make a recommitment to reading and studying God's word. Whatever form that takes, and whatever frequency you decide to adopt, my prayer for our church echoes the words of the psalmist in verse 40.

May we, as deeply devoted followers of Jesus, long for the Lord's precepts. May we delight in his commands. May we obey his word with all our hearts. And may we follow his decrees to the very end.

Let's pray.