



LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lecture - Psalm 119:30-40 and Ephesians 1:17-23 (New Revised Standard Version)

Psalm 119:30-40

(v. 30) I have chosen the way of faithfulness; I set your ordinances before me. (v. 31) I cling to your decrees, O Lord; let me not be put to shame. (v. 32) I run the way of your commandments, for you enlarge my understanding. (v. 33) Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end. (v. 34) Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. (v. 35) Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. (v. 36) Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain. (v. 37) Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways. (v. 38) Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who fear you. (v. 39) Turn away the disgrace that I dread, for your ordinances are good. (v. 40) See, I have longed for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life.

Ephesians 1:17-23

(v. 17) I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, (v. 18) so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, (v. 19) and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. (v. 20) God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, (v. 21) far above all rule and

authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. (v. 22) And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, (v. 23) which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Christian education has been a part of the African American religious experience since the beginning of the Black Church movement in America. The African American congregation was the primary, and often the only, source of education and instruction for African Americans in this country due to slavery and segregation. The Black Church understood its charge to equip and prepare its members for righteous living in this world through basic instruction on a variety of subjects. If one briefly surveys the historical literature of African Americans in this country, one will discover countless accounts of people: using the Bible to learn to read; seeking the counsel of the pastor on personal and civic matters; hearing a sermon that empowered them to succeed against impossible odds. In essence, African Americans have long understood that Christian education is an essential component of African American existence. For further exploration of the rich history of African American Christian education, please consult Religious Education in the African American Tradition: A Comprehensive Introduction by Kenneth Hill.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 119:30-40 and Ephesians 1:17-23

Part One: Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreters

Although I have participated in Christian education programs in various settings, my fondest memory of a Christian education experience was Baptist Training Union (BTU). Every Sunday evening, my mother and I would leave home and head to our congregation's BTU program. I loved every moment of it, from the "sword drills" designed to help us learn the books of the Bible to the specific classes that helped us be better members. Since our church was a large urban congregation, BTU provided smaller groups that were very interactive and conversational. While I would never dream of interrupting my pastor or Sunday school teacher during the sermon or Sunday school lesson, BTU was the place where I could engage in meaningful conversation about my faith and learn skills that would help me serve the church.

In my mind, if the word of God is alive and active, our study of that word should also be alive and active. It should be engaging and conversational, and that is the approach we will take with the assigned biblical passages.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm in the book, and it is written as an acrostic poem. There are twenty-two stanzas of eight verses each, and the stanzas are arranged in the order of the Hebrew alphabet. Each verse in a stanza begins with the same letter and contains the

word instruction. The Psalm in totality represents the psalmist's thankfulness for the law or word of God and imparts a wholehearted desire to live out the law.

The repetition of the word instruction is a significant literary device. The psalmist is pointing out the importance and centrality of being taught and understanding God's law. One cannot live a faithful life without applying the laws, decrees and ordinances of God on a regular basis. The law of the Lord is perfect and complete to the psalmist, and anyone should be delighted to participate in this perfection.

It is also important to note the acrostic nature of the Psalm. By arranging the Psalm in the order of the entire Hebrew alphabet, the psalmist is underscoring the completeness and the unity of God's word to the ancient reader. The law of the Lord is everything, and each part of it has deep meaning. There is no insignificant or unimportant instruction. Each component is essential and explains why careful study of the decrees and commandments is important.

In the context of the church today, we have seen somewhat of a revival in the Christian Education movement that can be likened to the psalmist's zeal in studying God's law. Congregations across the country have started taking life application and storytelling approaches to Christian education in order to address the diverse needs of their members. People want to be able to apply God's word and recognize God's providence in sacred and secular settings alike. A biblical precept comes to life when it can be applied in the break room at work. The worshipper has a stronger witness when grace is extended to them at the grocery store because they recognize it. Many congregations are abandoning "traditional" lecture based, teacher-driven approaches to Christian education in favor of small-group, interactive settings that encourage active engagement of biblical and extra-biblical texts and storytelling. People are in search of a relevant word, a way to make sense of their lives and the world. Like the psalmist, our understanding of Christian education has been enlarged (v.31).

The Ephesians text provides the perfect complement to the Psalm. While both texts offer thanksgiving to God for providing a word of instruction, the Ephesians text extends that thanksgiving into a petition for God to continue to impart wisdom and revelation. While the psalmist is thankful for the word that has been revealed, the author of the epistle prays that the word will continue to be revealed so that believers will come to know the hope to which they have been called. Many maintain that Paul wrote Ephesians while in prison. His authorship of the letter is possible at best, thus rendering the work as "deutero," or second Pauline. Perhaps a student of Paul composed Ephesians. Additionally, it is not clear that this letter was only directed to the church at Ephesus. More than likely, this was a circular letter sent to a number of churches in the region to speak to new believers.

This point, while minor, is central to interpretation and exhortation of this text. There are some things that are desirable for everyone who participates in the faith of Jesus Christ to know. The letter suggests that there is indeed a Christian education that is necessary for those who believe. It expresses a yearning for believers to grow in their knowledge and wisdom of Jesus Christ and to be enlightened with the eyes of understanding. The word

“understanding” in (v.18) could have just as easily been translated “heart.” The author wants believers to know God’s word and work with the eyes of their hearts. This is very similar to the psalmist’s vow to observe the law of God “with my whole heart.” Regardless of the precept or principle, God desires us to embrace the Word wholeheartedly and apply it in all that we do.

Challenge

We need to pursue Christian education with our whole hearts. There is no room for half-hearted approaches. With our whole heart we must seek to find new ways to engage people in study and discipleship. We must encourage those in our charge to open the eyes of their heart so that God’s Word will be alive and active in every facet of their lives. Each Christian educator, with his or her whole heart, must pray for a continued spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we can teach and preach the lifesaving Good News with passion, with purpose and with practical usability.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

The Psalm contains references to the eyes and the heart and wants the reader to see and feel with deep emotion and longing (vv. 36-37). The tone of the passage suggests feelings of desire and yearning. This is not an ordinary or simple request. The psalmist is pleading with God. The epistle also echoes the references to the eyes and to the heart; however, the action is transferred to God and the work of the Holy Spirit (v. 18). The writer of the epistle personifies both God and Jesus by giving God human-like characteristics and focusing on the authority of the body parts of Jesus (vv. 22-23). God is the giver, the lifter, the mover, the eye-opener, and the heart changer. The tone of the passage is hopeful. Paul wants the reader to participate in the moves of God, and we can imagine and hear his heartfelt prayer that this does come to pass.

Quotation

What condemnation to look back over your life and see where the way was made, but because you didn't have the mindset to understand the movement of God, you lost an opportunity, and had to go full circle in order to get that opportunity again.

-- Noel Jones¹

Christian Education Resources

1. Hill, Kenneth H. Religious Education in the African American Tradition: A Comprehensive Introduction. Atlanta, GA: Chalice Press, 2007.
2. Wimberly, Anne E. Soul Stories: African American Christian Education. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994.

Notes

1. Jones, Noel. The African American Pulpit Journal: Great Revivalists II (Spring 2003): pp. 51-58.