

April 5, 2009 by Steve Brandon



Hey! Work in Me!

Psalm 119:33-40

1. Teach Me (verses 33-34).
2. Move Me (verses 35 and 37).
3. Motivate Me (verses 36 and 38).
4. Protect Me (verses 39-40).

This morning, we will be looking at one of the stanzas of Psalm 119. We will be looking at the *he* (pronounced "hey") stanza, which begins in verse 33. Every verse of this stanza begin with the Hebrew letter, *he*. What is significant about this letter is that it is used in a particular Hebrew tense, which is called the *hiphil*. Whenever you find a word in the *Hiphil*, it always begins with the letter, *he*. Should you be able to read the Hebrew text of this stanza, you would quickly be able to discern that 7 of the 8 verses begin with verbs that are in the *Hiphil* tense.

The *hiphil* tense is primarily a "causative" tense. That is, it often communicates a command or a request, as if you are expressing a desire to cause something to happen. "Show me." "feed me," "bring to me." It's not the only Hebrew tense used to issue a command, but it does contain an intensity that other verb forms don't have. But, it's more intensive than a mere request or demand. It contains the idea of "causing" something to happen. "Cause me to see it." "Cause me to eat it." "Cause me to hold it."

For instance, in verse 33, we read, "Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes." The idea here is that the Psalmist is making a request of God. He is asking God to be active in the teaching process. To pull out the idea of the *hiphil*, you might translate this, "cause me to learn the way of Your statutes." In verse 34, we see another *hiphil*, "Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law." Again, you can see the Psalmist making a request of God. He is asking God to be active in giving him understanding. To pull out the idea of the *hiphil*, you might translate this, "cause me to understand Your law."

Below are the verses of the stanza. As you read them, see if you can discern which verse doesn't begin with a *hiphil* verb. In other words, which verse in this stanza doesn't begin with a request or command of any type.

- 33 Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall observe it to the end.
- 34 Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law and keep it with all my heart.
- 35 Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, for I delight in it.
- 36 Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to dishonest gain.
- 37 Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity, and revive me in Your ways.
- 38 Establish Your word to Your servant, as that which produces reverence for You.
- 39 Turn away my reproach which I dread, for Your ordinances are good.
- 40 Behold, I long for Your precepts; revive me through Your righteousness.

Which verse didn't begin with the *hiphil*? Only verse 40. But, it still contains an imperative, "Revive me" (in verse 40). It's simply that it's not in the *hiphil*. It's in another tense, called the *piel*. Now, in light of the letter, *he*, which begins each verse in this stanza and in light of the *hiphil* tense, my message is entitled, "Hey! Work in Me!" That's what the Psalmist desires here in these few verses. He desires that God would do a work in his heart. Just look at the verbs, Teach me, ... Give me understanding, ... Make me walk, ... Incline my heart, ... Turn away my eyes, ... Establish your word to your servant, ... Turn away my reproach." There is only one of these verbs that isn't directed toward God doing something in his own life to lead him to a greater love for and devotion to the LORD.

He requests that the LORD work in him, by teaching him (:33), and by giving him understanding (:34). He requests that the LORD cause him to obey, by making him walk in obedience (:35), and by turning his eyes away from sin (:37). He's requesting that the LORD to stir his heart to seek the LORD, by inclining his heart (:36), and by establishing His word in him (:38).

The only verse that doesn't address God's work in him comes in verse 39, "Turn away my reproach which I dread." Verse 39 has to do more with God working in others who would bring him scorn and contempt, much like verse 22, "take away reproach and contempt from me." But, the majority of these eight verses are this, "Hey! Work in Me!"

For my outline this morning, I have four points. Each of these points summarizes two verses, which help capture the theme of this section. My first point is this, ...

1. Teach Me (verses 33-34).

The Psalmist says, "Teach me!" This is the burden of verses 33-34, "Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall observe it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law and keep it with all my heart." The thrust of both of these verses are the same. Teach me, that I may follow you. Give me understanding of you.

I want for you to think here of the Psalmist's dependence upon the LORD to learn his word. He didn't say, "I'm going to study hard, that I might know your word." He didn't say, "I'm going to devote an hour a day to memorizing the Scripture." No, He said, "Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes." He said, "Give me understanding."

I want to press this upon you, church family, spiritual truth is more than a mere intellectual exercise. We need the LORD to teach us His precepts. We need a divine encounter if we will understand His testimonies. The Bible is a supernatural book and we need supernatural help to know it.

That's why it's good to pray to the LORD before you read His word. That's why it is good to pray as you are reading His word. That's why it is good to pray after you have read His word. Pray for God to make it clear to you. See, you need supernatural intervention to understand this book. To the disciples, Jesus said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 13:11). God gives us understanding.

Paul wrote that "a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritual discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). In other words, the truth of God's word is meaningless garbally gook to an unbeliever. They need to have their minds opened by the gracious working of God in their life before they will see the glories of the cross of Christ. To those who are dead in their sins, the message of the cross is foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18).

But, don't think that just because you are a believer, that you don't need God's help to understand His word. You need divine help to understand divine truth. Paul spelled this out clearly in 1 Corinthians 2:12-13, "We have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. We are taught by the Spirit, who indwells us. God is actively involved in teaching us."

So pray like the Psalmist when you read your Bible, "Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes. Give me understanding." You need divine assistance if you will ever understand His word.

Please notice further that the Psalmist isn't merely wanting an intellectual knowledge of God and His truth. No, it extends directly into obedience. He says, "Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall observe it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may observe Your law and keep it with all my heart." His heart is for obedience. He wants to observe God's law. His heart is for full devotion to His statutes.

Curse the day when you begin taking God's word and reading it for intellectual curiosity, rather than for a devotional love and obedience to Him. The Psalmist wanted to observe God's statutes, "to the end." The Psalmist wanted to keep God's law, "with all [his] heart." He so desires a life that abounds in loving devotion to the LORD. And he knows that this will only come about as God does a work in him.

And so, the prayer is "Teach Me" (verses 33-34). My next point comes from verses 35 and 37. Here, the Psalmist prays, ...

2. Move Me (verses 35 and 37).

By this, I simply mean that he desperately wants the LORD to intervene in his life and cause him to obey. This is the thrust of verse 35, "Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it." This is also the thrust of verse 37, "Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity, And revive me in Your ways." In other words, "God, move me! God, make me obey! God, keep my eyes where they belong."

Now, in no way does this remove his responsibility to obey the LORD and walk in purity before the LORD. As the Psalmist fails to walk in the path of God's commandments, and as his eyes fall upon the pornography and upon the coveted item and upon the trivialities of life that distract us from the LORD, he is fully responsible for His sin. But, the Psalmist realizes where his obedience comes from. It comes from the LORD.

Again, the apostle Paul understood these things. When he was talking about the other apostles and their obedience to the Lord and compared to his own, he said, "By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). Paul was amazed that he was even privileged to be an apostle. He had persecuted the church (1 Tim. 1:13). He was a blasphemer (1 Tim. 1:13). He was a violent aggressor (1 Tim. 1:13). And yet, God's grace abounded in his life. So much so, that Paul said, "It is God's grace that has made me what I am today. There is no other explanation. It's not me and my goodness. It's not me and my righteousness. It's not me and my abilities. Rather, it's God's grace with me. That's the only way to explain my life!"

When Paul said that he labored more than all of the apostles, it's a mighty claim of the work and labor that he expended in building up the church of God. However, when it came down to it, he was very clear. He said, "yet not I, but the grace of God with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). Were the truth be known, this is all of our obedience as well. We obey the LORD, because He is working in us to obey. When Paul said, "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12), he quickly followed it up with these words, "for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

In other words, we work and we labor and we serve the LORD, precisely because He is the one who is working in us! Now, there are those who hate this doctrine. Somehow, people feel that if God is the one who is working in us to produce obedience, and that apart from Him, we will stumble in the flesh, then what's the use? Doesn't this make me a robot? Doesn't this deny my freedom? And so, they resist this to the very end.

One such man who hated this doctrine was a man named Pelagius. He lived during the end of the 4th century in the days of Augustine. In

Augustine's confessions (which is his autobiography in prayer form), he offered up this prayer to God, "Grant what You command, and command what You desire." Pelagius thought that this prayer was simply outrageous. He argued from the standpoint of the freedom of the will. He believed that such a prayer takes away our freedom and responsibility.

Fundamentally, Pelagius believed that the assistance of divine grace was not needed for obedience. Rather, Pelagius held to the view that our human nature was uncorrupted by sin, and therefore, "we need no Redeemer to create in us a new will and a new life, but merely an improver and ennobler; and salvation is essentially the work of man." ^[1] Pelagius was condemned as a heretic at the Council at Carthage in 418 A.D.

I don't believe that Pelagius came to grips with verses like verse 35, "Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, for I delight in it. He is saying, "God, cause my life to be lived in such a way that I be obedient to Your commandments." Nor did Pelagius comprehend verse 37, "Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity, and revive me in Your ways." In other words, "God, direct the muscles in my eyes, so that I might turn away from anything that would distract me from Your ways." This is Augustine's prayer, "Grant what You command, and command what You desire."

The Psalmist says, "Teach Me" (verses 33-34). He also says, "Move Me" (verses 35-37). And now, we come to our third point this morning, ...

3. Motivate Me (verses 36 and 38).

In other words, "stir my heart with affections for You." We see this in verse 36, "Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to dishonest gain." We see this in verse 38, "Establish Your word to Your servant, as that which produces reverence for You."

Both of these verses describe a request for God to move the heart and to give it godly motivations. Again, I want for you to sense how much the Psalmist seeks the LORD to come into his life to change him into conformity of what God desires, causing him to walk in God's ways. Here, he is pleading for God to change his heart.

Have you ever lacked a desire for God's word? Has the Bible ever sat on your bedside table all week long, because you would rather read the newspaper instead of His holy word? Have you ever let your television stay warm, while your Bible collected dust? I know that I have. As a pastor, I have the privilege of being paid to spend much time in the Bible. And to my shame, there have been times when I have not had a zeal for God's word as I ought. There are times when my passion for God's word goes dry.

So, what do you do when your passion for God's Word is dry? As John Piper asks, ...

What do you do when you don't desire the Word of God? Or when you read it and don't see anything that gives you joy? Or when your joy is weak and disintegrates before the allurements of the world? What do you do if you are not satisfied in the God of the Bible, but prefer the pleasures of the world? Did Paul or the psalmists or the celebrated saints of history ever struggle with this? Yes, they did. And we should take heart. We all struggle with seasons of lukewarmness and spiritual numbness of heart. There are times in the lives of the most godly people when spiritual hunger becomes weak, and darkness threatens to consume the light, and everything but the vaguely remembered taste of joy evaporates. ^[2]

So, what do you do? You pray like the Psalmist, "Incline my heart to Your testimonies and not to dishonest gain. Establish Your word to Your servant, as that which produces reverence for You." You plead that the Lord would so stir your heart through His word that you have cannot help but to pursue His ways. That you walk in integrity. That you have a holy reverence for Him!

John Piper continues,

The first thing my soul needs is an *inclination toward God* and his Word. Without that, nothing else will happen of any value in my life. I must *want* to know God and read his Word and draw near to him. Where does that 'want to' come from? It comes from God. So Psalm 119:36 teaches us to pray, '*Incline my heart* to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain!' Very simply we ask God to take our hearts, which are more inclined to breakfast and the newspaper, and change that inclination. We are asking that God create desires that are not there. ^[3]

As you think about it, how easy is this? Do you need motivation to pursue God? Ask God for it. You don't need to drum it up within your own weak and feeble heart. Rather, you need God to come and help you create your motivation to pursue Him.

Let's turn to my last point this morning. We have seen the Psalmist say, "Teach Me" (verses 33-34), "Move Me" (verses 35 and 37), and "Motivate Me" (verses 36 and 38). Finally, he says, ...

4. Protect Me (verses 39-40).

This comes in the last two verses. Protect me from those who would harm me and my reputation. Protect me from my own sin, that brings deadness of heart. Consider again these two verses, "Turn away my reproach which I dread, for Your ordinances are good. Behold, I long for Your precepts; revive me through Your righteousness."

The writer of this Psalm knew what it was like to face the reproach of others.

In verse 23, he spoke of how "princes sit and talk against me."
In verse 51, he spoke of how "the arrogant utterly deride me."
In verse 69, he talked of how others had "forged a lie against me."
In verse 78, he mentions how the arrogant "subvert me with a lie."
In verse 85, he tells of how "the arrogant have dug pits for me."
In verse 86, he describes how "they have persecuted me with a lie."
In verse 95, he says, "the wicked wait for me to destroy me."
In verse 110, he says, "the wicked have laid a snare for me."
In verse 161, he writes, "Princes persecute me without cause."

And who's going to protect you against such enemies? It's the LORD who will protect you. The Psalmist here (in verse 39) is requesting that the LORD would actively work in his life, so as to turn away the reproach from Him. This is what Christ did. "While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Pet. 2:23). When Paul encountered Alexander, the coppersmith, he did him much harm. He said, "the Lord will repay him according to his deeds" (2 Tim. 4:14). So also here, the Psalmist looks to the Lord to be the one who actively protects him.

The reason for this has to do with the goodness of God's word, "... for Your ordinances are good." As he is slandered and persecuted and reproached for holding reproached to God's word, it is an attempt to make God's word look bad. Any attempt to bring down God's servant is ultimately an attempt to bring down God. But, as the argument goes, "Your ordinances are good. So, don't make them look bad by bringing a reproach upon you servant, who follows after them. So, "protect me," he says.

But, the Psalmist seeks more than protection from others. He also seeks protection from himself. He says in verse 40, "Revive me through Your righteousness.." This is a request to stir his heart through the righteousness of God.

He knows his weaknesses. He knows his frailty. He knows his need of God. And so, he pleads that God would be the one to stir his heart, to give his life, spiritual life. And it comes through His righteousness.

What a great opportunity to think, once again, of the gospel. How is it that God makes us alive in Christ? Through His righteousness. How is it that God brings us to Himself? Through His righteousness. How is it that we overcome our sin? Through His righteousness. How is it that we have hope to stand before Him? Through His righteousness. The writer to the Hebrews says, ...

Hebrews 9:13-14

For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit, offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

It is the righteousness of Christ that cleanses our consciences and gives us life before the LORD. May we stand in that righteousness.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 5, 2009 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Philip Schaff, History of the Early Church, volume 3, p. 815.

[2] John Piper, When I Don't Desire God, p. 137.

[3] John Piper, When I Don't Desire God, p. 151, emphasis his.