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STAND

diving into God's WORDS

Stand: Diving into God's Words

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Dedicated to
Princess and Gretel

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INTRODUCTION

As a teenager Earl Greene's goal was to become rich.

By age 21 his net worth was just over \$1 million. Intelligent and hardworking, he saw great opportunity in buying and selling real estate around his hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina. By age 26 Earl owned 55 rental houses that generated thousands of dollars in monthly income. He drove around Charlotte in a new Ferrari, which he paid for in cash, and accelerated from success to success.

When he decided to purchase his dream home at age 35, the \$650,000 down payment was written from his personal checking account. He owned the largest home in North Carolina's largest county, with a dining and entertainment area that could accommodate a small high school. (Think about that—having a party with 300 guests inside your house!) The house was just one more trophy proving that Earl Greene had made it financially. From his teen years on, Earl had worked hard, and by anyone's standard, he appeared to have it all.

It would be hard not to envy someone like Earl because his life contained everything that we think of as “success.” But it all began to crumble early one morning with a knock on the door. Earl recalls: “I woke up, opened the front door of my 13,889-square-

foot house—it was a nice front door, by the way—and there stood two men. As one of them flashed a badge at me, I thought, *This is bad, really bad.*”

The men at the door were from the U.S. government, and they informed Earl he wouldn't be going in to the office that day; instead he would be coming to spend some time talking to them.

“I was in my pajamas,” Earl says. “I asked if I could go change clothes, and they said they'd be happy to wait.”

As Earl knew, the government has a lot to say about how housing and lending works. In the course of his real estate transactions, Earl hadn't always followed legal requirements in mortgage lending at his company. Some of Earl's clients had received approval for home loans for which they were unqualified. As a result, Earl received a felony-level conviction for improper real estate practices. Earl was taken away to serve a 55-month sentence in a federal prison. The Ferrari was auctioned off, the mansion was gone, and as for net worth, he was broke. In a matter of weeks, he found himself with nothing.

Earl reflects, “Hard work had made me a millionaire, but greed generated dishonesty, and that eventually made me penniless.”

STARTING BACK FROM THE BOTTOM

Sitting alone in an empty jail cell, Earl called for the warden. He asked for a Bible, which the man even-



Psalm 119 fast facts

- 176 verses
- 22 stanzas, called strophes
- each strophe begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet
- 8 verses in each strophe
- Longest chapter in the Bible

tually brought, tossing it to him through the bars.

On the cold concrete floor the Bible fell open as Earl knelt to pray. “I poured out my heart to God and honestly said, ‘Jesus, I want to know You. This is coming many years overdue, but I give myself back to You. Please be the Lord of my life.’”

When Earl opened his eyes he noticed that his Bible lay open to Psalm 119. “That chapter is near the middle of the Bible,” he says. “I guess it just naturally fell open there. I stared down at the text, and what jumped off of the page were the words of verses 9-11.”

How can a young man keep his way pure?

By living according to your word.

I seek you with all my heart;

do not let me stray from your commands.

I have hidden your word in my heart

that I might not sin against you.

For the next five years Earl would read and reread Psalm 119. “Let’s just say I had plenty of time

to work on my spiritual growth,” he says, laughing. “In the area of discipleship, I had years of catching up to do. The Bible became my closest friend in that cell—and especially Psalm 119.”

Today Earl says that the time in prison was a gift from God. “God brought me to a zero balance financially to help me see that that’s where I was spiritually. My tears were not about losing all those things. I was so ashamed for the way that I had forgotten God, pushing Him out of the way as I pursued my dreams. I lost it all to find the Person who gave me everything.”

Though reading the entire Bible was part of Earl’s daily routine, it was Psalm 119 that impacted him the most. “God used that psalm, I believe with special intent, to comfort me and turn my life around.”

Few of us have as dramatic and startling a testimony as Earl Greene, but all of us, in our own ways, have stumbled, have strayed, have forgotten God. All of us need what Psalm 119 provided to Earl: hope, correction, reproof, and instruction.



Every word of the Bible is inspired by God and precious, but I must admit that some parts of it have gripped me more than others. Psalm 119 is one such passage. As my study of Scripture has continued over the years, my fascination with the Psalms, and with Psalm 119 in particular, has turned into genuine love for the chapter’s truth and into real appreciation for its beauty and depth. In short, Scripture

The Bible is known by many names!

Among the different versions of Psalm 119, the word “scripture,” or God’s revelation, is called judgment • Law • precept • statute • command or commandment • testimony • ways • word • ordinance • decree • path • direction • counsel • wise Living • instruction • regulation • teaching

is how God has chosen to reveal Himself to us, and Psalm 119 provides important keys to unlocking *all* of Scripture.

This is not merely an academic exercise; it is also a devotional one. The goal is to have a more intimate relationship with the One who gave us Scripture (not to ace a test on Psalm 119). In other words, I want you to know not only the book but the Author as well. That’s why we’ll begin our journey through Psalm 119 with what this rich chapter has to say about God.

GOD

let me tell you about someone i know

Tony works at a paint factory mixing chemicals. He told me about how newbies at the company get broken in.

At the expense of the new employees, workers at the paint factory know exactly how to get a laugh. When a newbie accidentally overfills one of the 55-gallon containers, a veteran at the business will look at the situation and say, “Hurry! We need a drum stretcher!” Tony said that it’s hilarious to watch a new recruit frantically search for a non-existent tool that is supposed to make the container larger.

Another gag goes like this: If a newbie puts too much red in the paint as he mixes it, a more seasoned worker will send him to find the “red extractor.” The joke intensifies as the unknowing worker is sent from person to person. All of the veteran workers know to refer the newbie on to someone

Ask “who?” not “why?”

The Bible spends few words on why God does what He does. But the scriptures are full of stories about who God is. It is better to read the scriptures asking “who is God?” before getting locked up asking why? why? why? For example, when King David was still a young shepherd, he heard about the Philistine giant named Goliath, who was taunting the Israelites. David didn't ask God, “why are the

else in the futile search for the red extractor. By the end of this prank, everyone on the shift has gotten a laugh over the newbie's inexperience and naiveté.

Maybe you've been through a similar situation where inexperience and lack of knowledge have resulted in temporary embarrassment. In times like that, help learning the ropes is greatly appreciated.

God knows we're all newbies when it comes to fathoming life and answering the big questions. God neither exploits our lack of knowledge nor passively ignores us as we clamber to find our way in this world. He's not hiding. He's not silent. He's not laughing behind our backs.

God has actively reached out to humanity and to each one of us individually.

YOU CAN KNOW GOD THROUGH THE BIBLE

Every verse of Scripture reveals something of the character of God. Verses that some consider boring,

Philistines beating us up? Why is there war? Why am I the one who has to face this big guy?" Instead he acted on what he knew about God. David had faith that God was powerful, mighty, and would protect his people. Armed with that knowledge in his heart and a slingshot in his hands, David bravely faced the monster Goliath. (For the whole story, see 1 Samuel 17.)

verses with numbers, long lists, or genealogies—even those tell us that God is interested in our world. He is alive and at work in the affairs of people.

Specifically what does Psalm 119 tell us about God?

Q: Who is God?

A: God is self-existent and sovereign.

Now I don't mean this to be a trick question, but I must tell you that neither the word *self-existent* nor *sovereign* appears anywhere in Psalm 119. However, we know that the writer thinks about God this way because he used the word *LORD*. Printers use small caps to signal the use of this unique name. In the Bible, "LORD" is a translation of a special Hebrew word *Jehovah*. *Jehovah* means "eternal God" or "self-existent God."

The word *sovereign* simply means "king" or "lord." Theologians use the word *sovereignty* to

indicate that GOD is in complete control of the universe. In other words, GOD is complete in Himself and is the King over all He has created.

In the face of tragedy and mystery, this is sometimes a difficult principle to grasp. When asking the tough “why?” questions, never forget that GOD is in control. Even though we may not understand Him with our limited comprehension, we can still trust that He has power over the events in our lives.

Verse 91 makes an interesting observation:

A “sovereign” is also a gold British coin, first minted in 1498 for King Henry VII. It has the symbols of the monarchy or “kingship” on it.

“Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.” Did you know that GOD has the power (and wisdom) to orchestrate all things so that they work for His plans and purposes? He does. GOD’S loving, wise control of the universe is such that

He can make every detail—from death to spilled orange juice to a lost fortune—ultimately contribute toward His greater purposes. When we willingly follow His Words, GOD even weaves our mistakes into something beneficial. (Much, much, much more on this in *Stand: Seeking the Ways of GOD*.)

Q: Who is God?

A: God is holy.

Because GOD is self-existent and sovereign, His very character defines what is right and good or—to

use a theological word—“holy.” Something—or someone—is *holy* if it is worthy of worship.

This kind of worship is the fall-on-your-face, don't-look-up-or-you-might-be-blinded-with-glory kind of worship (verse 120). It's when you realize you are in the presence of a supernatural, awesome, righteous, pure, unimaginable power.

We see this sense of the word throughout Psalm 119. The writer declares GOD'S worthiness every time he

addresses GOD as Jehovah. But more than that, the writer directly praises GOD. In verse 164, for example, the writer makes sure there can be no mistake of GOD'S worthiness to be worshiped: “Seven times a day I praise you.”

Because GOD is holy, we should approach Him with respect and reverence. When you ask the “why?” questions, remember that the “Who” you are asking is infinitely worthy of all your devotion, honor, and praise.

Q: Who is God?

A: God is loving.

GOD'S love is made plain in Psalm 119. In verse 64 the writer says, “The earth is filled with your love.” And it is also interesting that GOD'S love is closely

In Old Testament times, when people came into the presence of the holy God, sometimes they took off their sandals (see Exodus 3:5-6 and Joshua 5:15).

associated with His Law. Let's look at one verse in particular, verse 149: "Hear my voice in accordance with your love; preserve my life, O LORD, according to your laws." Because GOD loves us, He hears our voices and preserves our lives—and He does so according to His laws! GOD'S Law is not a burden; it is a mercy and a protection for us.

You might have noticed that God has favorite numbers: 40, 12, 7, and 3. In the Bible, the number 7 means "complete."

GOD'S instructions are not to make us unhappy; on the contrary, when followed, GOD'S laws provide the ultimate joy and conditions for our success. If you find yourself struggling with obedience and asking, "Why does GOD want me to do that?" remember that He has provided the Law for your well-being. GOD has reached out to us with commands because He loves us. One of the best methods for learning about the loving ways of GOD is to understand His Law.

Q: Who is God?

A: God is all-sufficient.

Remember the special Hebrew name *Jehovah* that means "self-existent GOD"? The reality of GOD'S self-existence has many implications. It means, for example, that GOD has the ability to create all that we see from nothing. Because He has that ability—and this is big news—He doesn't need us or our help.

But because He loves us, He allows us to help Him.

When I was growing up, my parents made their living on an egg farm near Greensboro, North Carolina. I would sometimes follow my father around, trying to help with the family business. Often I was more of a hindrance to his work than an asset, but he tolerated it and trained me because he loved me. Eventually I caught on and was a real contributor to the family farm—I learned to keep the place clean, drive the truck, and help my dad with sales. At times I resented the smelly, noisy chickens and hated the work, but today I cherish the memories. I consider the farm one of the truly important and lasting experiences of my life.

In a way, our work for GOD is like my work as a young child on that egg farm. GOD doesn't need us to accomplish His work. In fact, He is all-sufficient. However, He allows us to participate in His ways because it eventually brings His children joy and maturity. That's why Psalm 119:77 says, "Let your

Ex nihilo means "from nothing" in Latin. If you want to sound uber-intelligent, say this often and out loud: "God created the universe and everything in it ex nihilo."

The agnostic says, "No one can know whether or not there is a God—it's impossible." The Christian says, "God has told us who He is; He wants to be known through creation, our conscience, and the Bible."

compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight.” GOD’S requirements of us are not for His benefit but for ours; in fact our very lives depend on them.

Because GOD loves us and knows that we depend on Him, He makes Himself known to us in ways we can understand. We will not fully know GOD in this lifetime, but drinking deeply of Psalm 119 can give us an understanding of who GOD is and what He wants us to do. These truths can see us through life’s difficult “why?” times.



Who is God according to Psalm 119?

You are my portion, O LORD;

I have promised to obey your words. (verse 57)

You are good, and what you do is good;

teach me your decrees. (verse 68)

Your hands made me and formed me;

give me understanding to learn your commands. (verse 73)

May your unfailing love be my comfort,

according to your promise to your servant. (verse 76)

Your faithfulness continues through all generations;

you established the earth, and it endures. (verse 90)

Yet you are near, O LORD,

and all your commands are true. (verse 151)

Your compassion is great, O LORD;

preserve my life according to your laws. (verse 156)

(See also verses 64, 77, 114, 149, 159, and 168.)