Expository Lessons from the Psalms

I. Introduction to Psalm 119 (designated Psalm 118 in the Septuagint)

- a. Distinctive features of this psalm include:
 - i. It is the longest of all the **Psalms** and may be the longest single chapter in the entire Bible.
 - ii. While many psalms identify the author (David, sons of Asaph, etc.), we do not know who wrote this psalm.
 - iii. This psalm is in the form of an acrostic poem in Hebrew, with one stanza for each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each line of any given stanza begins with the same letter.
 - iv. The early church relied on the Septuagint, abbreviated LXX, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, for their Old Testament text. The LXX also is generally the version of the Old Testament that we find Jesus and the apostles using when they quote from the Old Testament.
 - 1. In the LXX, this psalm is designated **Psalm 118**. When early Christian writers refer to it, that is the designation they use.
 - 2. The LXX version of this psalm is very similar to what we find in the Masoretic Text (MT), the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, upon which almost all modern translations are based.
 - a. However, there are a few differences. One or two lines in particular, where the LXX differs from the MT, are of interest here, based on how early Christian writers understood the text.
 - b. For that reason, I will be teaching from a translation based on the LXX (in this case, from the Orthodox Study Bible translation).
 - c. For anyone interested in learning more about the LXX, consider:
 - i. Audio teaching by David Bercot on this topic, available through Scroll Publishing.
 - ii. Video lesson by Chuck Pike on the Strength to Strength website: 'Sacred Writings: The Bible Jesus Read'. (https://youtu.be/KVGWptyJXQo)

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- b. What motivated me to teach a lesson on this psalm at this time.
 - i. Recently I taught a lesson for *Strength to Strength* on personal devotion to the Word of God: *'Sacred Writings: a Meal that Makes You Hungrier'*. (https://youtu.be/EiCTGOhxwvQ) And I followed up with a similar lesson that I taught to our church.
 - ii. This psalm ties in very well with that theme that we recently explored. I hope this will encourage you in your own daily study of the Word of God.
 - 1. I consider this lesson today to be simply an introduction to the psalm. I hope it encourages you to read through it and meditate on it on your own.
- c. Importance of this psalm.
 - i. This is the favorite psalm of my wife, Alison. It is one of my personal favorites, as well.
 - ii. The primary focus is on the importance of loving, meditating on, and following the Scriptures.
 - 1. The author of this psalm clearly has an extraordinary love for the Scriptures and is very devoted to following them.
 - 2. This psalm provides wonderful, encouraging mental pictures of the importance of the Word of God to us.
 - 3. By spending time meditating on this psalm, we have an opportunity to become more like its author, since we tend to become like those we spend time with.
 - a. *"He who walks with wise men will be wise*, But the companion of fools will be destroyed." (**Proverbs 13:20**, NKJV)
 - iii. For those who may be struggling in their own walk with the Lord, this psalm is a wonderful place to turn for a 'spiritual re-set', in my opinion.
 - iv. There are a couple of interesting insights that early Christians had regarding in this psalm that I found interesting. I am sharing some of those in this lesson.
 - 1. One of them is an unusual prophecy related to the crucifixion of Jesus, found in the LXX text.

II. About the Author

- a. We do not know the name of the author. However, in the course of reading this psalm we learn some important things that he reveals about himself.
- b. At the time he writes this, he is a young man and apparently not prominent.
 - i. "I am young and beheld as nothing." (Psalm 119/118:141, LXX, OSB)
- c. He is a passionate person, very expressive of his emotions.
 - i. He speaks of loving, hating, abhorring, weeping, etc., throughout the psalm.
- d. Apparently, he had drifted from following God at one point in the past, but had returned to God.
 - i. This is encouraging to hear, someone who made a spiritual 'comeback'.
 - ii. "Before I was humbled, *I transgressed*. (Psalm 119/118:67, LXX, OSB)
 - iii. "I went astray like a lost sheep." (Psalm 119/118:176)
- e. He did not have an easy life.
 - i. He had enemies who hated him and wanted to kill him.
 - ii. He had affliction and many hardships.
 - iii. In view of that, this psalm provides a great antidote to the so-called 'prosperity gospel', which is pervasive in various forms and falsely claims that if we turn to God, our life on this earth will become problem-free.
 - iv. Examples of opposition and affliction he faced:
 - 1. "Rulers sat and spoke against me." (119/118:23)
 - 2. "The ropes of sinners ensnared me." (**119/118:61**)
 - 3. "[Transgressors] They persecuted me unjustly; help me. They almost ended my life on earth." (**119/118:86-87**)
 - 4. "Sinners set snares for me." (119/118:110)
 - 5. "Affliction and trouble found me." (**119/118:143**)
 - 6. "Those who persecute me in lawlessness draw near." (119/118:150)

- 7. "Many are those who pursue and afflict me." (119/118:157)
- 8. "Rulers persecuted me without cause." (119/118:161)
- v. Many times people ask, "What did I do wrong?" when they face pain and hardship after deciding to follow the Lord. They somehow believe that if they do everything right, they will have a good life in this world.
 - However, consider the famous statement by David in Psalm
 34, a psalm that Peter pointed to in 1 Peter.
 - a. "*Many are the afflictions of the righteous*, But the LORD delivers him out of them all." (**Psalm 34:19**, NKJV; designated **Psalm 33** in the LXX)
 - 2. Jesus warned the apostles:
 - a. "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also." (John 15:18–20, NKJV)
 - 3. The Hebrews writer likewise reminds us of the heroes of faith who went before us and the ultimate example of Jesus enduring the cross, to point to what we should expect in this life.
 - a. "...Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.
 - b. "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.
 - c. "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with

endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls." (Hebrews 11:35–12:3, NKJV)

III. Blessed are They Who Walk in the Law of the Lord

a. Read Psalm 119/118:1-16.

- b. The focus of the opening lines of this psalm is practical, addressing *how we live*. This is not an 'academic' type of approach!
 - i. The contrast is between those who *walk according to the Law of the Lord* versus those who *do not* "walk in His ways".
 - ii. The approach that the writer takes to life:
 - 1. Study/read/learn the commands of God.
 - 2. Meditate on the word of God (this theme is repeated throughout the psalm).
 - a. Picture of meditating: the clean animals of **Leviticus 11** were those who "chewed the cud" and had split hooves. Ruminants eat pure grass (unlike pigs, who are undiscriminating and eat almost anything, including even garbage). Then they chew on it throughout the day, to extract all the nourishment.
 - Meditating on it means thinking about what you are reading, chewing on it and asking questions of the text. It involves considering what this reveals about God and His character, and what the implications are for your life.
 - c. The author saw the commands of God as good and wonderful things.
 - i. Most people consider the commands of God to be a burden. They see God as the great killjoy.
 - 1. As a result, many Christians want to find out what the 'bare minimum' is that they

must do in order to make it into heaven in the end.

- a. They often ask questions such as,
 "Is this (unpopular command) a salvation issue?"
- ii. In contrast, the writer of this psalm sees the commands of God as a *wonderful thing*. He seeks God with his whole heart, without reservation, and sees the love and protection of God in the commands.
 - 1. He believes God's commands are all good and are given for his own good, in the end.
- 3. Hide the word of God in his heart.
 - a. Memorizing Scripture will help him avoid sin when tempted.
 - b. The Scriptures are the "sword of the spirit" of **Ephesians 6**, the offensive weapon in the battle against the forces of evil.
 - c. Jesus is the example when He was tempted by Satan after His baptism. He had memorized Scripture and quoted it back when tempted.
- 4. Follow the commands of the Lord. Walk in them. This must become a way of life for us; this is not just a theology lesson!
 - a. **Question:** Now that Jesus has come, has this changed? Aren't we saved by the grace (favor) of God? By God's mercy rather than by our obedience to the laws and commands of God?
 - b. Read Matthew 5:17-20.
 - i. Jesus fulfilled the Law of Moses. In Deuteronomy 18:15-19, Moses explained that another prophet "like him" would be raised up by God in the future and that anyone who did not listen to that one would be cut off.
 - ii. Jesus was uniquely like Moses among all the prophets, in bringing in new laws (many of which are in the Sermon on the Mount).

- 1. This parallel between Moses and Jesus is developed by Eusebius in *Proof of the Gospel*, book 3.
- Eusebius explained that in order for Jesus to be the promised prophet who would be "like Moses" (in fulfillment of **Deuteronomy 18:15-19**), this new prophet would need to bring new laws. After all, the distinctive characteristic of Moses (different from all the prophets who followed) was that he *brought new laws from God*!
- 3. In the opening to the Sermon on the Mount, in **Matthew 5**, Jesus said he came to fulfill the Law of Moses.
 - a. "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17, NKJV)
 - b. Jesus fulfilled the Law of Moses by being the one promised in the Law, the prophet who the Lord would "raise up", who would be "like Moses" (therefore, bringing in new laws). Recall that Peter and Stephen both identify Jesus as the one who fulfilled that promise given by Moses. (Acts 3:22, 7:27)

c. Read Matthew 7:21-27.

- i. We still need to follow the commands of God if we want to be saved by the Lord!
- ii. "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice <u>lawlessness</u>!" (Matthew 7:23, NKJV)
- iii. Jesus changed the laws handed down by Moses (generally replacing them with stricter requirements, such as in the Sermon on the Mount, but in some cases, such as the dietary laws relaxing the requirements handed down by

Moses). However, he certainly did not abolish all laws. He said that the "lawless" would not inherit His kingdom!

- "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall." (Matthew 7:24–27, NKJV)
- iv. This does not in any way discount that we are saved by God's mercy (see also 119/118:88), and through His favor (grace) to us.

IV. Unveil My Eyes

- a. Read Psalm 119/118:17-24.
- b. Thoughts on the expression, "unveil my eyes".
 - Bible translations based on the Masoretic Text read: "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law." (Psalm 119:18, NKJV)
 - ii. In the same verse in the LXX, it reads, "unveil my eyes".
 - iii. The idea is that we are asking the Lord for help, so that we may "see" wonderful things in the Scriptures that we otherwise might be blind to.
 - 1. I think of this passage often when I am reading the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament, and I believe this is something we should be praying and asking of God all the time.
 - 2. The Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit. They are deep waters, and there are things in them that we need God's help to see more clearly.

- iv. The expression "*unveil* my eyes" in the LXX, which is the version that Paul generally quotes from in his letters, reminds me of what Paul said in **2 Corinthians 3**.
- c. Read 2 Corinthians 3:12-18 and 4:3-6.
 - i. When Jews read the Old Testament, they don't understand the deeper meaning. Figuratively they are '*veiled*', and therefore blind to what is there in the Scriptures. They are unable to grasp the significance of what they are reading.
 - ii. We who turn to Christ can gaze at the Scriptures and 'see' what is there behind the text. We can see Christ.
 - 1. Examples:
 - a. The Passover Lamb and Feast of Unleavened Bread from **Exodus**. These things foreshadow the sacrifice of Jesus and those who follow Him, removing the sin from their lives.
 - b. **Isaiah 53, Psalm 22** and all the other prophecies about the crucifixion of Jesus.
 - c. **Deuteronomy 18** prophecy about the prophet the Lord would "raise up", who would be "like Moses".
 - d. From **Numbers**, which we studied recently:
 - i. The rock that accompanied the people in the Wilderness, from which water came, represented Christ.
 - ii. The entire journey through the Wilderness foreshadows the Christian life (baptism, spiritual food and drink, time of testing, reward for the faithful at the end), as Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13.
 - iii. The bronze serpent lifted up in Wilderness, which Jesus said foreshadowed how He would be "lifted up", on the cross, so that those facing death could be saved. (Numbers 21, John 3:14-15)
 - iv. 'Joshua/Jesus' raised up to complete the mission begun by Moses, so people would not be "like

sheep having no shepherd". (Numbers 13:16 and 27:16-23).

- e. There are SO MANY other prophecies and foreshadowings of Jesus throughout the Old Testament Scriptures!
- 2. Odd to me that today Christians either (1) virtually ignore the Old Testament, or (2) turn to Jewish scholarship to try to get a better understanding of the Old Testament.
 - a. **Question:** Why would you go to *those who are blind* if you want to see more clearly?
 - i. I have been surprised at the large number of Christians who, in recent years, have turned to Jewish sources to get a better understanding of the Old Testament (and in some cases even of the New Testament).
 - ii. In **Romans 11**, Paul says the Jews who rejected Christ are like branches of an olive tree that have been *cut off* from the life-giving tree.
 - 1. **Question:** Do you think the apostle Paul recommends that we turn to people like that for greater spiritual insight into the Scriptures?
 - b. Paul said that the Gentile Christians in Corinth could see what is in the Old Testament, while the Jewish scholars of his day could not. They were veiled and effectively blind!
 - i. Early Christian writers like Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Eusebius had to explain to the Jews what was 'veiled' to them.
- d. Early Christian writer Origen drew on this concept, and this passage from **Psalm 119/118:18** to refute the charge of Celsus, a pagan writer who claimed that the Scriptures lacked an allegorical level of significance and therefore were devoid of deeper truths. Writing c. 248 AD, Origen stated:
 - i. "If Celsus had read the Scriptures in an impartial spirit, he would not have said that 'our writings are incapable of admitting an allegorical meaning.' For from the prophetic Scriptures, in which historical events are recorded (not from the historical), it is possible to be convinced that the historical portions also were written with an

allegorical purpose, and were most skilfully adapted not only to the multitude of the simpler believers, but also to the few who are able or willing to investigate matters in an intelligent spirit. If, indeed, those writers at the present day who are deemed by Celsus the 'more modest of the Jews and Christians' were the (first) allegorical interpreters of our Scriptures, he would have the appearance, perhaps, of making a plausible allegation.

- ii. "But since the very fathers and authors of the doctrines themselves give them an allegorical signification, what other inference can be drawn than that they were composed so as to be allegorically understood in their chief signification? And we shall adduce a few instances out of very many to show that Celsus brings an empty charge against the Scriptures, when he says 'that they are incapable of admitting an allegorical meaning.'
- iii. "Paul, the apostle of Jesus, says: 'It is written in the law, You shall not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treads out the corn. Does God take care for oxen? or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope of partaking.' (1 Corinthians 9:9 and 1 Timothy 5:18; quoting from Deuteromony 25:4)
- iv. "And in another passage the same Paul says: 'For it is written, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery; but I speak concerning Christ and the Church.' (Ephesians 5:31-32)
- v. "And again, in another place: 'We know that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud, and in the sea.' (1 Corinthians 10:1-2) Then, explaining the history relating to the manna, and that referring to the miraculous issue of the water from the rock, he continues as follows: 'And they all ate the same spiritual meat, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.' (1 Corinthians 10:3-4)
- vi. "Asaph, moreover, who, in showing the histories in **Exodus** and **Numbers** to be full of difficulties and parables, begins in the following manner, as recorded in the book of **Psalms**, where he is about to make mention of these things: 'Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.' (**Psalm 78/77:1-3**)
- vii. "Moreover, if the law of Moses had contained nothing which was to be understood as having a secret meaning, the prophet would not have

said in his prayer to God, 'Open my eyes, and I will behold wondrous things out of Your law;" (**Psalm 119/118:18**) whereas he knew that there was a veil of ignorance lying upon the heart of those who read but do not understand the figurative meaning, which veil is taken away by the gift of God, when He hears him who has done all that he can, and who by reason of habit has his senses exercised to distinguish between good and evil, and who continually utters the prayer, 'Open my eyes, and I will behold wondrous things out of Your law."

1. (Source: Origen, *Against Celsus*, book 4, chapters 49-50; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 520)

V. It Was Good that You Humbled Me

- a. Read **Psalm 119/118:65-72**.
- b. In the past, the author of the psalm had transgressed (turned away from God) and was humbled as a result. In hindsight, he sees "it was good that You humbled me, that I might learn your statutes".
 - i. Sometimes suffering *and even sin* can lead people to seek God and to turn to the Scriptures.
 - ii. A comfortable life of 'smooth sailing' and worldly prosperity often leads people to a tragic spiritual outcome. Consider the example of the third soil in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13, Mark 4, Luke 8) and the warnings of Deuteronomy 8 regarding getting entangled by the world and *forgetting about God*.
 - iii. Suffering and humbling has driven many back to God. Consider the examples of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4, Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33, and the prodigal son of Jesus' parable in Luke 15.
 - iv. God, in his sovereignty, can use even apparent short-term 'victories' of Satan (people falling into sin, destruction, etc.) to bring people back to Him.
 - 1. Even the tragedy and evil of wartime conflict can lead people back to faith in God, as captured by the old saying: "There are no atheists in foxholes."
- c. The author values the law of the Lord more than thousands of pieces of gold or silver.
 - i. This is one of the wonderful images in this psalm regarding how much he values the Word of God.

VI. How I Love Your Law

- a. Read **Psalm 119/118:97-112**.
- b. The author of this psalm extols the benefits of meditating on the Word of God "the whole day long".
 - i. Wisdom
 - 1. Through studying the Scriptures, he became *wiser than his enemies*.
 - 2. He has gained *more understanding than the elders*.
 - a. Recently I was asked a question by a younger member of our church. He was looking for wisdom in a persona matter, and sought out my counsel due to the value he placed on my *greater age*.
 - i. I am the oldest brother in our church fellowship.
 - b. However, a longer life is no guarantee of more wisdom. I reminded my young questioner that I know plenty of old fools!
 - c. While advanced age can be valuable for gaining wisdom, the greatest benefit will come if those decades have been occupied being *immersed in reading and meditating on the Scriptures*.
 - ii. Sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.
 - 1. Reminds me of the manna in the wilderness, which tasted sweet like pastry made with honey (**Exodus 16:31**).
 - Manna to teach us that "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Deuteronomy 8:3)
 - iii. Providing guidance in the midst of dark and challenging terrain.
 - The Word of God is a "lamp to my feet and a light to my paths". (Psalm 119/118:105)

VII. An Unusual Line (from the LXX)

a. Read **Psalm 119/118:113-120**.

i. In the LXX, **verse 120** reads: "*Nail my flesh* with the fear of you".

- 1. **Question:** What (and Who) does that make you think of? Is there anyone in the Scriptures whose flesh was "nailed" to something?
- 2. Note that this reads differently in the Masoretic Text, the Hebrew text that most modern translations are based on. For example, in the New King James version:
 - a. *"My flesh trembles* for fear of You, And I am afraid of Your judgments." (**Psalm 119:120**, NKJV)
 - b. However, in the LXX (and I did check it out in the Greek) it has the unusual wording "*Nail my flesh*..."!
- 3. Cyprian, a bishop in the early church from North Africa, in a discussion about prophecies on the crucifixion of Christ, *including this passage*. Writing c. 250 AD:
 - a. "[*Title*] That the Jews would fasten Christ to the cross.
 - b. "In Isaiah: 'I have spread out my hands all day to a people disobedient and contradicting me, who walk in ways that are not good, but after their own sins.' (Isaiah 65:2) Also in Jeremiah: 'Come, let us cast the tree into His bread, and let us blot out His life from the earth.' (Jeremiah 11:19, LXX) Also in Deuteronomy: 'And Your life shall be hanging (in doubt) before Your eyes; and You shall fear day and night, and shalt not trust to Your life.' (Deuteronomy 28:66. LXX)
 - c. "Also in the twenty-first Psalm: 'They tore my hands and my feet; they numbered all my bones. And they gazed upon me, and saw me, and divided my garments among them, and upon my vesture they cast a lot. But You, O Lord, remove not Your help far from me; attend unto my help. Deliver my soul from the sword, and my only one from the paw of the dog. Save me from the mouth of the lion, and my lowliness from the horns of the unicorns. I will declare Your name to my brethren; in the midst of the Church I will praise You.' (Psalm 22:16-22, designated Psalm 21:17-23 in the LXX)
 - d. "<u>Also in the **118th Psalm**: '*Pierce my flesh with nails* <u>through fear of You</u>.' (**Psalm 119,** designated **118:120**, LXX)
 </u>

- e. "Also in the 140th Psalm: 'The lifting up of my hands is an evening sacrifice.' (Psalm 141/140:2) Of which sacrifice Sophonias [*Zephaniah*] said: 'Fear from the presence of the Lord God, since His day is near, because the Lord has prepared His sacrifice, He has sanctified His elect.' (**Zephaniah 1:7**, LXX)
- f. "Also in Zechariah: 'And they shall look upon me, whom they have pierced.' (Zechariah 12:10) Also in the 87th Psalm: 'I have called to You, O Lord, the whole day; I have stretched out my hands unto You.' (Psalm 88/87:9) Also in Numbers: 'Not as a man is God suspended, nor as the son of man does He suffer threats.' (Numbers 23:19, LXX)
- g. "Whence in the Gospel the Lord says: 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whosoever believes in the Son may have life eternal.' (John 3:14-15)
 - i. (Source: Cyprian, *Testimonies Against the Jews*, book 2, chapter 20; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 524)
 - Note that Cyprian's Old Testament quotes generally follow the LXX, which he is reading (and he assumes his readers are as well). When he refers to specific psalms, he therefore follows the traditional LXX numbering convention.

VIII. Concluding Thoughts

- a. Read **Psalm 119** (or perhaps even better, **Psalm 118** from a version based on the LXX) on your own, and read it often.
- b. Imitate the heart of the author, seeking the Lord with your whole heart.
 - i. Study the Scriptures daily.
 - ii. Meditate/ruminate on what you are reading.
 - iii. Hide the Word of God in your heart (memorize it, as Jesus did, to help in temptation).
 - iv. Walk in His ways; obey what the Lord is telling you.

- c. See adversity and even repentance from sin as an opportunity to draw closer to God and to better understand His Word.
- d. View the Word of God as the author of this psalm did:
 - i. More valuable than gold and silver
 - ii. Keeping us from sin
 - iii. Sweeter than honey to the taste
 - iv. Making us wiser than our enemies and those who are older
 - v. A lamp for our feet and light for our paths, to guide us on our way.
- e. Lastly, let us continue to ask the Lord to unveil our eyes, that we may see wonderful things hidden in His Law!