

Series: “*The Solas of the Reformation—500 Years Later*”

Main Idea: Psalm 119 addresses two critical questions for us about Sola Scriptura.

I. What does Sola Scriptura mean?

- A. We affirm Sola Scriptura because of what the Bible is.
  - 1. It is authoritative.
  - 2. It is comprehensive.
- B. We affirm Sola Scriptura because of what the Bible does.
  - 1. It keeps us pure (9).
  - 2. It helps us not sin (11).
  - 3. It counsels us (24).
  - 4. It revives us (25, 88).
  - 5. It strengthens us (28).
  - 6. It sets us free (32, 45).
  - 7. It gives us hope (49).
  - 8. It comforts us in suffering (50, 52).
  - 9. It directs us (105, 133).
  - 10. It sustains us (116, 175).

II. What does Sola Scriptura produce?

- A. We must devote ourselves to its study.
  - 1. We should walk in it (1).
  - 2. We should obey it (4).
  - 3. We should respect it (6).
  - 4. We should learn it (7).
  - 5. We should memorize it (11).
  - 6. We should recount it (13).
  - 7. We should delight in it (16).
  - 8. We should long for it (20, 131).
  - 9. We should submit to its counsel (24).
  - 10. We should trust in it (40).
- B. We must devote ourselves to its Source.

Make It Personal: What will you do with the Bible this week?

*Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:6*

Five hundred years ago, on October 31, 1517, a Roman Catholic monk by the name of Martin Luther posted 95 Theses on the door of Wittenburg Cathedral. He was specifically protesting the Catholic doctrine of indulgences. His action set in motion what we call today the Protestant Reformation.

Luther stood up to his ecclesiastical superiors because of his conviction that the Bible, not church tradition, is our final authority. Two years later in 1519 Luther debated the Roman Catholic Johann Eck arguing that Scripture alone is the basis for Christian faith and doctrine.

In 1520 Luther published three significant books, one of which he called, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. In it he outlined the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and denied the authority of the Pope to interpret the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

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\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a message delivered at WBC on 11/17/96.

<sup>2</sup> <http://protestantism.co.uk/timeline.html>

Luther was accused of heresy and in 1521 he was put on trial at the Diet of Worms. The Archbishop of Trier asked him, "Do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?"

Luther gave this now famous reply: "Since, then, Your Majesty and Your Lordships desire a simple reply I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason--I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me."<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther from the Catholic church.

Why did the reformation take place, and why should it matter to us today? We're going to answer those questions this fall at WBC in a series entitled, "*The Solas of the Reformation: 500 Years Later.*"

Sola is a Latin word meaning "alone." There were five solas that served as the rallying cry of the Protestant reformers. These phrases—*Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, *Solus Christus*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*—affirm that Scripture alone is our highest authority, and that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for God's glory alone.

I'd like to take one sola at a time and in the weeks ahead ponder some questions. Does it still matter? And if so, why, and how? Are these five solas still worth dying for as did so many?

This morning we begin with *sola Scriptura*. I'm convinced there is a desperate need in the church today, especially in America, to understand and affirm *sola Scriptura*. We have more Bibles than ever before. Yet *sola Scriptura* is under attack, from the outside and inside the modern church.

We need to answer two questions this morning, and Psalm 119 addresses them both for us. First, what does *sola Scriptura* mean? And second, what does *sola Scriptura* produce?

### I. What does Sola Scriptura mean?

In essence it means that God's written Word is our final and ultimate authority in life. When I make a decision, when I decide what to believe or what to do, I am to seek and submit my life to what the Creator God says in His Word. Not what some person says, whether a pastor or a priest, parent, or boss, or president, or the church institution, or the government. These may be authorities in our lives (small 'a'), but there is one Authority (capital 'A') over all others.

God has given us His inspired Word, the Scriptures. Let's turn to Psalm 119. It's here that we find two reasons to affirm sola Scriptura.

#### **A. We affirm Sola Scriptura because of what the Bible is.**

Psalm 119 is the longest "chapter" in the Bible (though technically, the Psalter is divided into *psalms* not *chapters*). This wisdom psalm is an alphabetic acrostic in which there are twenty-two stanzas (one for each letter in the Hebrew alphabet), with each

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<sup>3</sup> taken from *Desiring God*, John Piper, pp. 130-1.

stanza containing 8 verses. You could think of Psalm 119 as “176 Reasons We Should Build our Lives on God's Word” for that’s really the intent of it

We learn two characteristics of the Scriptures from Psalm 119.

1. *It is authoritative.* God did not give Israel Ten *Suggestions*, but Ten Commandments. In Psalm 119, the psalmist reflects on the revelation God has given to His people, utilizing eight different synonyms to refer to the Word of God (see VanGemeren).

- "Law"--Notice verse 1, “Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the *law* of the LORD.” This term appears 25 times, and has both a broad and a narrow meaning. In a broad sense, it refers to any "instruction" that God gives His people. In the narrow sense, it denotes the Torah of Moses which God gave to Israel at Sinai.

- "Word" occurs 24 times. It refers to any word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord, whether it pertains to the Decalogue, the law of Moses, or a message revealed through one of the prophets. It's a general term for divine revelation (11, 67).

- "Laws" comes from a different Hebrew term which appears 23 times. It denotes cases or legal decisions pertaining to legal issues. The Pentateuch is full of case laws which God, the Supreme Judge, gave to Israel as the basis for their legal system. The term is also translated as "ordinances" or "judgments."

- "Statutes" appears 23 times and is derived from the word meaning "witness" or "testify." It's synonymous with "covenant" and signifies loyalty to the terms of the covenant Yahweh made with Israel. It refers to the dependability of God's Word (24).

- "Commands" occurs 22 times. It is a synonym of "law" as well as "decrees" and "laws," referring to anything that the covenant God has ordered. It speaks of authority.

- "Decrees" (or "statutes") appears 21 times and comes from the root that means to "engrave" or "inscribe." It speaks of the binding force and permanence of Scripture. Verse 5, "Oh that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!"

- "Precepts" occurs 21 times. It points to particular instructions that the Lord gave, indicating that He cares about detail. In the Bible, God doesn't say, "Your best is good enough for Me," but specifies what He requires of us (see verse 27).

- "Promise" (or "Word") is found 19 times, and denotes anything that God has spoken, commanded, or promised (verse 140).

Like eight beautiful bells, these eight words ring throughout the psalm. The connection for each term is the *source*. It is *God's law, God's Word, God's statutes, God's commands*, and so on. God is the author. And my friend, if God's the author, then His Word is authoritative.

Perhaps that's why Mark Twain once confessed, "It's not what I don't understand about the Bible that bothers me; it's what I do understand!" Reading the Bible is very different from reading Freud or Skinner or the latest book on the family. The Bible is in a class all by itself.

Why is that? Paul tells us why in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed." When we open the Bible we are opening a supernatural book. We are seeing words that came from God Himself.

How did God do it? Peter explains in 2 Peter 1:20-21, "...no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation...but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Did men write this book? Yes, forty different men over a period of 1500 years. Yet these men *spoke from God* as they were *carried along by the Holy Spirit*. Think of a sailboat. How does it move? You say, "It's the sail," and you're right. "But it's also the wind." Yes indeed. That's actually the word picture Peter uses here. Like wind in the sail these human authors were carried along by God the Holy Spirit.

So this book is authoritative.

2. *It is comprehensive.* The theme of Psalm 119 is the written revelation of God. All 176 verses except three (verses 90, 122, and 132) mention a title referring to the Word of God. In the Hebrew Bible, each verse in the particular twenty-two sections begins with the same Hebrew letter, from Aleph to Tav. The very structure of this psalm conveys the message that God's Word is the comprehensive manual for life, everything we need to know, from "A" to "Z"!

Five hundred years ago the average church-goer didn't go to the Bible for answers for life's problems. He didn't even have a Bible. The authority was the church, and specifically the pope and church councils.

"No," said Luther and others. "Sola Scriptura."

William Tyndale, one of the leading English reformers in the 1500s, was talking to a fellow priest about the need for the Scriptures to be in the English language. At that time, it was illegal to own a copy of the Bible in the English language. Tyndale's companion was not convinced of the need for the Scriptures in English. He is reported to have said that as long as people had the Bishop of Rome's laws, the Scriptures were not needed.

To this Tyndale replied, "I defy the Pope and all his laws, if God spare my life, I will make a boy that driveth the plough know more of the Scripture than thou dost."<sup>4</sup>

Tyndale did translate the Bible into English. And was called a heretic for it by the church. A decade later he was strangled and burned at the stake.

Sola Scriptura, said Tyndale, is worth dying for.

A century ago a battle raged over the inerrancy of Scripture. Some concluded (they were called 'liberals' or 'modernists') that since the Bible was written by men it must contain error. Others (called fundamentalists because this is a fundamental, non-negotiable) said, "The Bible is without error, for it is indeed God's Word and He cannot lie."

Sola Scriptura will always be under attack. In the past forty years or so, the battle has divided evangelicals. The issue is not inerrancy, but sufficiency. Is God's Word sufficient or do we need some other authority?

In his book, *The Sufficiency of Christ*, pastor and author John MacArthur makes the following alarming observation (pp. 19-20), "In the past two decades or so...theology has become more and more humanistic. The focus has shifted from God to people and their problems, and counseling has replaced worship and evangelism as the main program of many churches. Most seminaries now put more energy into teaching ministerial students psychology than training them to preach. Evidently they believe therapists can

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.tyndalesploughboy.org/>

accomplish more good in Christians' lives than preachers and teachers. That mindset has taken the church by storm. Evangelicalism is infatuated with psychotherapy. Emotional and psychological disorders supposedly requiring prolonged analysis have become almost fashionable."

Do you remember what the Lord told Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9? He said, "My grace is *sufficient* for you."

Yet frankly, many in our day are skeptical of this. They view this notion that Christ and His Word are sufficient as being simplistic and naive.

"We're not living in Bible times," they say. "The problems we face today are more complex. We need more than the Bible."

Is that true? To address that objection, I would call your attention to a second reason presented in Psalm 119 for sola Scriptura.

### **B. We affirm Sola Scriptura because of what the Bible does.**

Is it true that the problems facing people today are too complex for the Bible? Before you answer that, take a look at what the writer of Psalm 119 says the Scriptures have the power to do for us. By looking at the verbs, I came up with a list of 21 things that God's Word can do in our lives. For the sake of time, I'll merely mention ten.

1. *It keeps us pure (9)*. "How can a young man keep his way pure?" asks verse 9. The answer? "By living according to your word." What defense does a teenager have against the pressures of sexual temptation? What can guarantee a young person a black and white testimony in a gray world? The Word of God can!

2. *It helps us not sin (11)*. Ponder verse 11, "I have hidden your word in mine heart, that I might not sin against you." Do you know what it is that can enable a person to break sinful habits that long have enslaved him? It's God's Word.

3. *It counsels us (24)*. "Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors." How did the psalmist view the Scriptures? As his *counselor*.

Many sincere Christians are abandoning the sufficiency of Scripture these days with the rationale, "Oh, the Bible is fine for spiritual matters, but we need psychology for deep problems of the soul."

May I ask you something? What did Christians do for 18 centuries before psychology came along? Did they live deficient lives? Did God deprive them of the help they needed for the deep problems of the soul?

Not at all. Who better can care for the soul than the Creator of the soul, the One Who has given us, in His own words, "everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3)"?

4. *It revives us (25, 88)*. Psalm 119 arises out of a context of turmoil. In his need, where did the psalmist turn? He tells us in verse 25, "I am laid low in the dust; preserve [KJV, 'revive'] my life according to your word."

Where should you turn if you want revival in your life? Notice verse 107 [KJV], "I am afflicted very much; revive me, O LORD, according to your word."

5. *It strengthens us (28)*. Do you ever get weary in life? Where do you turn for a boost? Some find a temporary fix in a pill or a bottle or a thrill, but it doesn't last. What does? Verse 28 tells us, "My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word." The Word of God gives us strength which we'll never find anywhere else.

Some time ago a person from the community came for counsel. She had lost her husband to a sudden death and after many months found it very difficult to function. The

loss was taking a toll on her physically. In the weeks that followed we helped her begin to fill her mind with God's Word. And she began to experience hope.

God's Word truly *strengthened* her.

6. *It sets us free* (32, 45). "I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free (32)." "I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts (45)." Do you long to be free from the chains of sinful patterns? Do you want to help others experience the same? Then look to God's Word.

7. *It gives us hope* (49). "Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope." Where can a person turn when they need hope? Friends, this is such good news. God doesn't just offer us the ability to *cope*, or get by. Through the ministry of His Word He gives people in need true *hope*. Not just a pseudo-hope that things might get better, but the guaranteed hope that we can experience joy and peace no matter how difficult our circumstances.

I've seen this time and time again in the counseling room. People come in with marriages in turmoil, fears that paralyze them, sinful habits that enslave. They need hope. They want hope. And God's Word gives it to them.

8. *It comforts us in suffering* (50, 52). "My comfort in suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life (50)." "I remember your ancient laws, O LORD, and I find comfort in them (52)." What is it that has a 100% track record for bringing comfort to those who suffer? It's not the latest best-seller. It's the ancient laws of God. It's the Scriptures.

9. *It directs us* (105, 133). Notice a familiar verse (105), "Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light for my path." In His Word, God gave us in written form a blueprint for living, a roadmap that directs us without detour from here to heaven.

Are you struggling with decisions right now and don't know which way to go? Verse 133 is a fitting prayer, "Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me."

10. *It sustains us* (116, 175). Listen to the psalmist's request in verse 116, "Sustain me according to your promise and I will live; do not let my hopes be dashed." Again in verse 175, "May your laws sustain me."

My friend, this is what God's Word does for us, and these ten results are just the beginning. The Word of God will also keep us from shame (46), extend God's compassion to us (77), make us wiser than our enemies (98), give us more insight than our teachers (99), bring joy to our heart (111), give us great peace (165), and more.

Why must we still affirm sola Scriptura in 2017? Why must we make sure that the help we offer to people comes from the Scriptures alone? According to Psalm 119, for two reasons. First, we affirm sola Scriptura because of what the Bible is, it is authoritative and comprehensive. And secondly, because of what the Bible does; it keeps us pure, helps us not sin, counsels us, revives us, strengthens us, sets us free, gives us hope, comforts us in suffering, directs us, sustains us, and so much more.

This brings us to a second question, one that hits close to home.

## II. What does Sola Scriptura produce?

Psalm 119 answers this for us by identifying two devotions that result.

### **A. We must devote ourselves to its study.**

It is said that George Mueller read the Bible two hundred times. David Livingstone read it four times in succession while he was detained in a jungle town. Billy Graham says that his medical missionary father-in-law, Nelson Bell, made it a point "to rise every morning at four-thirty and spend two to three hours in Bible reading. He read the Scriptures every morning and was a walking Bible encyclopedia. Spurgeon once said, "A Bible which is falling apart usually belongs to someone who is not."<sup>5</sup>

According to Psalm 119, what are we to do with God's Word? We've already looked at the verbs which tell us what God's Word will do for us. Now let's examine the verbs that inform us what God says we are to do with His Word. I discovered at least 34 different activities in which the psalmist said he engaged himself with the Word. Here are ten.

1. *We should walk in it (1)*. "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD."

Walk. That's talking about life. Step by step. How do we know where to go in life, what to do, what not to do? We make it our aim to walk according to God's law. Not to the left, not to the right, but in the path mapped out by God's Word (see Prov 4:27; Josh 1:7). If we believe sola Scriptura, then we should walk in the Word.

2. *We should obey it (4)*. "You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed." Sola Scriptura isn't just knowing the Bible. It leads to obedience. Fully obeyed, says the psalmist.

3. *We should respect it (6)*. Here's how the KJV renders verse 6, "Then shall I not be ashamed when I have respect ['consider,' NIV] unto all thy commandments."

Do you respect God's Word? Do you know why we should listen attentively when a sermon is preached? Because the Bible deserves respect.

4. *We should learn it (7)*. "I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws." We don't know what we don't know. We don't enter this world knowing God's Word. We must learn it, which means we need teachers who will open its treasures to us.

More precious than gold, says Psalm 19:10. That's what God's Word is. And if we believe it, we'll study it.

Which we gladly do at WBC. We go digging in the goldmine of this Book when we gather as a church. We are here to hear and learn and understand the treasure God has given to us.

The reality is, that doesn't happen in many churches. People don't gather to dig in the goldmine, but to listen to music, or watch a movie, or enjoy a latte. Nothing inherently wrong with those things, but why *wouldn't* we spend the majority of our time going for the gold God has graciously put right before us?

If we believe sola Scriptura, then we should in delight in learning this Book.

5. *We should memorize it (11)*. This takes learning to the next level. Notice verse 11, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." When we find a gold nugget, we take steps to deposit it in the bank vault of our minds.

How many verses could you quote from memory right now? Would that number be higher than it was a year ago?

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<sup>5</sup> Hughes, 39

6. *We should recount it (13)*. This goes beyond memorization for we are to take it in and then give it out. Notice verse 13, “With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.” In other words, I talk about God’s Word with others. I share the treasure with them.

7. *We should delight in it (16)*. If the Bible is boring to us, something is drastically wrong. The psalmist wrote, “I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.”

What’s the first thing you do in your day? I urge you to make your time in God’s Word top priority. It’s okay to use variety. Read the Book. Sing the Book. Listen to others reading the Book. Pray the Book. Journal what you’re learning from the Book. Write a daily highlight from the Book on a 3x5 card so you can chew on its nutrition throughout the day.

Sola Scriptura says we say with the psalmist, “I will not neglect your word.”

8. *We should long for it (20, 131)*. Can you relate to the passionate words of the psalmist in verse 20? “My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times.” And in verse 131, “I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands.”

Keep in mind, he’s talking about Deuteronomy. The Pentateuch. He longs for the Torah, the law of God. Why? Because that’s what he had one thousand years before Christ, just a portion of the Book God has now given to us in completed form.

9. *We should submit to its counsel (24)*. “Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors.” We all need counsel to navigate this life. Where should we seek it? From this Book. *Your statutes are my counselors*.

10. *We should trust in it (42)*. Listen to the sound of confidence in verse 42, “Then I will answer the one who taunts me, for I trust in your word.”

So what should we do when society says the Book is outdated? “You don’t base your view of marriage on some old book, do you?” “You think God created this world? What about the fossils?”

Sola Scriptura says, “You know, it boils down to trust, for you and me. And I prefer to trust the wisdom of the One who is all-knowing and infinite rather than the ever-changing notions of His finite creatures.”

Time constraints permit me only to mention what else the psalmist did with God’s Word. He held it fast (31), put his hope in it (43), lifted up his hands to it (48), got up at midnight to thank God for it (62), befriended others who obeyed it (63), pondered it (95), loved it (97), had a high regard for it (117), and more.

The point is, if we embrace sola Scriptura, it will show in what we do with it. We will devote ourselves to its study.

But I need to offer a warning. It’s possible to study the Scriptures in vain. The Pharisees did, and Jesus told them so in John 6:39-40. What was missing?

A second devotion.

**B. We must devote ourselves to its Source.** Some have accused the writer of Psalm 119 of worshiping the Word rather than the Lord. The truth is, the reason he cherished the Word was because he loved its Source. So must we.

When we study God’s Word, our motive must never be merely information, but adoration. We study the Word in order that we might better know the Source of the Word, God Himself.



This of course is why Jesus Christ came. God sent His only Son into the world to rescue fallen and helpless sinners. He became their substitute. He lived the righteous life they could not and refused to live. Then He willingly died on a cross to pay the horrible yet just penalty that sinners deserve for transgressing God's law.

He literally died in their place. Then on the third day God raised His Son from the dead, and His Son returned to heaven, where He took His rightful place on the throne as the ruling King of the universe.

My friend, Jesus Christ is no ordinary king. He is the king who died for His people. He is the Savior-king, and whoever calls on Him He will save. Whoever believes in Him He will forgive and give the undeserved gift of eternal life.

That's what the Book says.

Make It Personal: What will you do with the Bible this week?

I don't know who wrote these words, but I first heard them quoted in a college chapel by Don Jennings. I want it to be the testimony of my life.

*Though the cover is worn, and the pages are  
torn, and though places bear traces of tears,  
yet more precious than gold is this Book worn  
and old, that can shatter and scatter my fears.*

*This old Book is my guide, it's a friend by my  
side, it will lighten and brighten my way; and  
each promise I find soothes and gladdens the  
mind, as I read it and heed it each day.*

*When I prayerfully look, in the precious old Book,  
Many pleasures and treasures I see;  
Many tokens of love, from the Father above,  
Who is nearest and dearest to me.*

*To this Book I will cling, of its worth I will sing,  
though great losses and crosses be mine; for I  
cannot despair, though surrounded by care,  
while possessing this blessing divine.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Author unknown