

THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE*

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God's Word is sufficient to meet every need of the human soul as David verifies frequently in his psalms. Psalm 19:7-14 is the most comprehensive statement regarding the sufficiency of Scripture. It is an inspired statement about Scripture as a qualified guide for every situation. Scripture is comprehensive, containing everything necessary for one's spiritual life. Scripture is surer than a human experience that one may look to in proving God's power and presence. Scripture contains divine principles that are the best guide for character and conduct. Scripture is lucid rather than mystifying so that it enlightens the eyes. Scripture is void of any flaws and therefore lasts forever. Scripture is true regarding all things that matter, making it capable of producing comprehensive righteousness. Because it meets every need in life, Scripture is infinitely more precious than anything this world has to offer.

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It is significant that one of the biblical names of Christ is Wonderful Counselor (Isa 9:6). He is the highest and ultimate One to whom Christians may turn for counsel, and His Word is the well from which we may draw divine wisdom. What could be more wonderful than that? In fact, one of the most glorious aspects of Christ's perfect sufficiency is the wonderful counsel and great wisdom He supplies in times of despair, confusion, fear, anxiety, and sorrow. He is the quintessential Counselor.

Now that is not to denigrate the importance of Christians counseling each other. There certainly is a crucial need for biblically sound counseling ministries within the body of Christ. There is no dispute over the important role of those who are spiritually gifted to offer encouragement, discernment, comfort, advice, compassion, and help to others. In fact, one of the very great problems that has led to the current plague of bad counsel is that churches have not done as well as they could in enabling people with those kinds of spiritual gifts to minister excellently. The complexities of this modern age make it more difficult than ever to take the time

*From John MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 75-90. Used by permission.

necessary to listen well, serve others through compassionate personal involvement, and otherwise provide the close fellowship necessary for the church body to enjoy health and vitality.

Churches have looked to psychology to fill the gap, but that is not going to work. Professional psychologists are no substitute for spiritually gifted people, and the counsel psychology offers can not replace biblical wisdom and divine power. Moreover, psychology tends to make people dependent on a therapist, whereas those exercising true spiritual gifts always turn people back to an all-sufficient Savior and His all-sufficient Word.

A Psalm on the Sufficiency of God's Word

King David was an example of someone who occasionally sought advice from human counselors, but always turned ultimately to God for answers. As many of the psalms reveal, he was especially dependent on God alone when he struggled with personal problems or emotions. When hit with depression or inner turmoil, he turned to God and wrestled in prayer. When the problem was his own sin, he was repentant, broken, and contrite. He prayed, "Examine me, O Lord, and try me; / Test my mind and my heart" (Ps 26:2).¹ The spiritually mature always turn to God for help in times of anxiety, distress, confusion, or unrest in the soul, and they are assured of wise counsel and deliverance.

That happens because every need of the human soul is ultimately spiritual. There is no such thing as a "psychological problem" unrelated to spiritual or physical causes. God supplies divine resources sufficient to meet all those needs completely. David's writings reflect the depth of human experience, emotion, and spiritual insight of one who had fully experienced the extremities of life. He knew the exhilaration of going from shepherd to king. He wrote of everything from absolute triumph to bitter discouragement. He wrestled with pain so deep he could hardly bear to live. His own son Absalom tried to kill him and was then killed. He suffered from horrible guilt because of immorality and murder. His children brought him constant grief. He struggled to understand both the nature of God and his own heart. Of God he said, "Holy and awesome is His name" (Ps 111:9), while of himself he said, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, / And cleanse me from my sin" (Ps 51:2). He told God what he felt and cried out for relief—though he admitted God had every right to punish him.

At the end of some of David's psalms he looked out a window of hope, but sometimes he did not. Yet David always went to God because he understood God's sovereignty and his own depravity. He knew that his all-sufficient Savior alone had the answers to his needs and the power to apply those answers (Ps 119:24). And he knew that those answers were to be found in the truth about God revealed in His

¹Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations throughout this article are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

Word, which is itself perfectly sufficient. The sufficient God revealed Himself in His sufficient Word.

On the sufficiency of Scripture, Ps 19:7-14 is the most monumental statement ever made in concise terms. Penned by David under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it offers an unwavering testimony from God Himself about the sufficiency of His Word for every situation. It counters the teaching of those who believe that truth gleaned from modern psychology must augment God's Word:

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul;
 The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.
 The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
 The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.
 The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
 The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.
 They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;
 Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.
 Moreover, by them Thy servant is warned;
 In keeping them there is great reward.
 Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults.
 Also keep back Thy servant from presumptuous sins;
 Let them not rule over me;
 Then I shall be blameless,
 And I shall be acquitted of great transgression.
 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
 Be acceptable in Thy sight,
 O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

With an economy of words the Holy Spirit gives us a comprehensive catalog of the characteristics and benefits of Scripture, each of which merits close investigation.

In verses 7-9 David makes six statements about Scripture. Each title for Scripture includes the phrase "of the LORD." In revealing the many-faceted general purpose of God's Word, he calls Scripture "the law of the LORD," "the testimony of the LORD," "the precepts of the LORD," "the commandment of the LORD," "the fear of the LORD," and "the judgments of the LORD." In each case "LORD" translates the Hebrew Tetragrammaton יהוה (*yhwh*), which is the covenant name of God. Clearly David believed that Scripture proceeds from God Himself.

Each of the six statements highlights a characteristic of God's Word and describes its effect in the life of one who embraces it.

Scripture Is Perfect, Restoring the Soul

In the first statement (v. 7), he writes, "The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul." The Hebrew word translated "law" is a form of the word תּוֹרָה (*tôrāh*), which emphasizes the didactic nature of Scripture. Here David uses it to refer to Scripture as the sum of what God has revealed for our instruction, whether it be creed (what we believe), character (what we are), or conduct (what we do).

“Perfect” is the translation of a common Hebrew word meaning “whole,” “complete,” or “sufficient.” It conveys the idea of something that is comprehensive, so as to cover all aspects of an issue. Commentator Albert Barnes wrote,

The meaning [of “perfect”] is that [Scripture] lacks nothing [for] its completeness; nothing in order that it might be what it should be. It is complete as a revelation of Divine truth; it is complete as a rule of conduct. . . . It is absolutely true; it is adapted with consummate wisdom to the [needs] of man; it is an unerring guide of conduct. There is nothing there which would lead men into error or sin; there is nothing essential for man to know which may not be found there.²

Scripture is comprehensive, embodying all that is necessary to one’s spiritual life. David’s implied contrast is with the imperfect, insufficient, flawed reasoning of men.

God’s perfect law, David said, affects people by “restoring the soul” (v. 7). The Hebrew word translated “restoring” can mean “converting,” “reviving,” or “refreshing,” but my favorite synonym is “transforming.” The word “soul” (in Hebrew, נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*) refers to one’s person, self, or heart. It is translated all those ways (and many more) in the OT. The essence of it is the inner person, the whole person, the real you. To paraphrase David’s words, Scripture is so powerful and comprehensive that it can convert or transform the entire person, changing someone into precisely the person God wants him to be. God’s Word is sufficient to restore through salvation even the most broken life—a fact to which David himself gave abundant testimony.

Scripture Is Trustworthy, Imparting Wisdom

David, further expanding the sweep of scriptural sufficiency, writes in Ps 19:7, “The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.” “Testimony” speaks of Scripture as a divine witness. Scripture is God’s sure testimony to who He is and what He requires of us. “Sure” means His testimony is unwavering, immovable, unmistakable, reliable, and worthy to be trusted. It provides a foundation on which to build one’s life and eternal destiny.

In 2 Pet 1:16-18 Peter reflects back to his time on the Mount of Transfiguration with all the supernatural events of that marvelous occasion (the majestic glory of Christ, the voice from heaven, and the appearance of Moses and Elijah). But despite all he had experienced, he says in verse 19, “We have more sure—the prophetic word” (literal translation).

In that statement Peter affirmed that the testimony of God’s written Word is a surer and more convincing confirmation of God’s truth than what he had personally seen and heard at the transfiguration of Christ. Unlike many today who cite spurious mystical experiences, Peter had a verifiable real-life encounter with Christ in His full glory on the mount. And in contrast with those today who advocate

²Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament: Psalms*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974) 171.

miracles as the necessary proof of God's power and presence, Peter looked to Scripture as a higher and more trustworthy authority than even such a dramatic experience. Commentator Samuel Cox has written,

Peter knew a sounder basis for faith than that of signs and wonders. He had seen our Lord Jesus Christ receive honor and glory from God the Father in the holy mount; he had been dazzled and carried out of himself by visions and voices from heaven; but, nevertheless, even when his memory and heart are throbbing with recollections of that sublime scene, he says, "we have something surer still in the prophetic word." . . . It was not the miracles of Christ by which he came to know Jesus, but the word of Christ as interpreted by the spirit of Christ.³

Scripture is the product of God's Spirit moving upon its human authors to produce His Word in written form (2 Pet 1:20-21). As such, it supersedes even apostolic experiences with Jesus Himself. Perhaps that is why Jesus prevented the disciples on the Emmaus Road from recognizing Him as He "explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). He wanted their faith and preaching to be based on Scripture, not merely on their own personal experience—no matter how moving or memorable that experience might be. If that was true of the apostles, how much more should believers today seek to know God's Word rather than seeking supernatural or ecstatic experiences. Experience can be counterfeited easily, but not Scripture. It is once-for-all delivered!

God's sure Word makes the simple wise (v. 7). The Hebrew word translated "simple" comes from an expression meaning "an open door." It evokes the image of a naive person who does not know when to shut his mind to false or impure teaching. He is undiscerning, ignorant, and gullible. But God's Word makes him wise. "Wise" speaks of one who not merely knows some fact, but of one who is skilled in the art of godly living. He submits to Scripture and knows how to apply it to his circumstances. The Word of God thus takes a simple mind with no discernment and makes it skilled in all the issues of life. This, too, is in contrast to the wisdom of men, which in reality is foolishness (1 Cor 1:20).

Scripture Is Right, Causing Joy

David adds a third statement about the Scripture's sufficiency. He writes, "The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart." Precepts are divine principles and guidelines for character and conduct. Since God created human beings and knows how they must live to be productive for His glory, He has placed in Scripture every principle they need for godly living.

God's precepts, David said, are "right." Rather than simply indicating what is right as opposed to wrong, that word has the sense of showing someone the true path. The truths of Scripture lay out the proper path through the difficult maze of

³Samuel Cox, cited in Marvin Vincent, *World Studies in the New Testament: II Peter* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 687.

life. That is a wonderful confidence. So many people today are distressed or despondent because they lack direction and purpose. Most seek answers from the wrong sources. God's Word not only provides the light to our path (Ps 119:105), but also sets the route before us.

Because it steers through the right course of life, God's Word brings great joy. If you're depressed, anxious, fearful, or doubting, learn to obey God's counsel and share in the resulting delight. Do not turn to self-indulgent pursuits like self-esteem and self-fulfillment. Focus on divine truth. Therein you will find true and lasting joy. All other sources are shallow and fleeting.

David himself went to Scripture for help when he was discouraged or depressed. In Ps 119:50 he wrote, "This is my comfort in my affliction, / That Thy word has revived me." Again, David speaks against the futility of the joyless paths men follow, pursuing happiness but never finding it to last.

Even the "weeping prophet" Jeremiah experienced joy amid tremendous human stress because God's Word was his joy and the delight of his heart (Jer 15:16).

Scripture Is Pure, Enlightening the Eyes

Psalm 19:8 gives a fourth characteristic of Scripture's utter sufficiency: "The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes." "Commandment" stresses the Bible's non-optional nature. It is not a book of suggestions. Its divine mandates are authoritative and binding. Those who treat it lightly place themselves in eternal peril. Those who take it seriously find eternal blessing.

"Pure" could better be translated "lucid"—Scripture is not mystifying, confusing, or puzzling. The synonym "clear" is best. God's Word is a revelation—a revealing of truth to make the dark things light, bringing eternity into bright focus. Granted, some things in Scripture are hard to understand (2 Pet 3:16). But taken as a whole, the Bible is not a bewildering book.

Scripture, because of its absolute clarity, brings understanding in place of ignorance, order in place of confusion, and light in place of spiritual and moral darkness. It stands in stark contrast to the muddled musings of unredeemed men, who themselves are blind and unable to discern truth or live righteously. God's Word clearly reveals the blessed, hopeful truths they can never see.

Scripture Is Clean, Enduring Forever

In Ps 19:9 David uses the term "fear" as a synonym for God's Word: "The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever." "Fear" speaks of the reverential awe for God that compels us to worship Him. Scripture, in this sense, is God's manual on how to worship Him.

The Hebrew word translated "clean" speaks of the absence of impurity, filthiness, defilement, or imperfection. Scripture is without sin, evil, corruption, or error. The truth it conveys is therefore absolutely undefiled and without blemish. That truth is pictured in Ps 12:6, where David calls the Word "flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times" (NIV).

Because it is flawless, Scripture endures forever (Ps 19:9). Any change or modification could only introduce imperfection. Scripture is eternally and unalterably perfect. Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Mark 13:31). That guarantees that the Bible is permanent, unchanging, and therefore relevant to everyone in every age of history. It has always been and will always be sufficient.

I once agreed to debate a man who led an “evangelical” homosexual denomination. I asked, “What do you do with the Bible’s condemnations of homosexuality as sin?”

“Oh, come on!” he said. “Everybody knows that the Bible is psychologically unsophisticated, reflecting the views of primitive thinking. The Bible is antiquated in its sociological theory. You cannot go to an ancient document like this and expect to deal with twentieth-century social problems. The Bible ought to stay in its own environment. It needs to be updated with a contemporary understanding of psychological and sociological phenomena.”

It must grieve God when people slander Him by claiming that the Bible is outdated or is not sophisticated enough for our educated society. Scripture needs no updating, editing, or refining. Whatever time or culture you live in, it is eternally relevant. It needs no help in that regard. It is pure, sinless, inerrant truth; it is enduring. It is God’s revelation for every generation. It was written by the omniscient Spirit of God, who is infinitely more sophisticated than anyone who dares stand in judgment on Scripture’s relevancy for today’s society, and infinitely wiser than all the best philosophers, analysts, and psychologists who pass like a childhood parade into irrelevancy.

Scripture Is True, Altogether Righteous

Verse 9 gives the final characteristic and effect of God’s all-sufficient Word: “The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.” “Judgments” in that context means ordinances or divine verdicts from the bench of the Supreme Judge of the earth. The Bible is God’s standard for judging the life and eternal destiny of every person.

Unbelievers can’t know what is true because they are blind to God’s Word. Being deceived by Satan, they search vainly for spiritual truth. But aside from God’s Word they cannot discover ultimate truth about the things that really matter: origins, the purpose of life, morality, values, life, death, destiny, eternity, heaven, hell, true love, hope, security, and every other fundamental spiritual issue.

Recently I received a book on how to deal with depression, which was written by a contemporary psychiatrist. A section entitled “Reprogramming Your Conscious Mind” particularly caught my attention. The doctor’s first suggestion was to shout, “Cancel!” every time you have a negative thought. She also recommended sleep programming—playing a tape recording all night that contains lots of positive feedback. During the day she said you should listen to positive music.

The doctor also thought it would be helpful to cultivate a meaningful spiritual philosophy. She said to find a belief system that works for you—any will

do—but be sure to avoid people who talk about sin and guilt. Her final point was that you are to find the light in yourself. Unfortunately, that is the best human wisdom can do.⁴

Jesus illustrated the desperate, hopeless search for truth in human wisdom when He said to a group of unbelievers:

Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. . . . He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God (John 8:43-47).

By way of contrast, believers have the truth about everything that really matters. What an enormous privilege to possess the Word of truth!

Because Scripture is true, it is “righteous altogether” (Ps 19:9). The implication of that phrase is that its truthfulness produces a comprehensive righteousness in those who accept it. And because it is a complete and exhaustive source of truth and righteousness, we are forbidden to add to it, take from it, or distort it in any way (Deut 4:2; 2 Pet 3:15-16; Rev 22:18-19).

In Psalm 119 David gives further testimony to the righteous sufficiency of Scripture:

Forever, O LORD,
Thy word is settled in heaven.

I esteem right all Thy precepts concerning everything,
I hate every false way.

Righteous art Thou, O LORD,
And upright are Thy judgments.
Thou hast commanded Thy testimonies in righteousness
And exceeding faithfulness.

Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness,
And Thy law is truth.

The sum of Thy word is truth,
And every one of Thy righteous ordinances is everlasting
(vv. 89, 128, 137-38, 142, 160).

Contrary to what many are teaching today, there is no need for additional

⁴Priscilla Slagle, *The Way Up from Down* (New York: Random House, 1987) 218–27.

revelations, visions, or words of prophecy. In contrast to the theories of men, God's Word is true and absolutely comprehensive. Rather than seeking something more than God's glorious revelation, Christians need only to study and obey what they already have!

More Than Much Fine Gold

David concludes that God's Word is "more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold" (Ps 19:10). Scripture is infinitely more precious than anything this world has to offer, perfectly sufficient for every need of life. Thus Scripture assesses its own immense value. As for its ability to satisfy spiritual appetites, David notes that it is "sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb." To David, meditating on God's Word was a source of great pleasure and enrichment. It meant more to him than the sweetest things in life.

Nothing this world has to offer is more precious than God's Word. I have a friend who collects rare Bibles. He owns a wonderful collection, with one Bible dating back to the fourth century. But my favorite is a Bible from sixteenth-century England, one of the earliest printed copies of God's Word. The top third of this Bible is covered with the blood of its original owner. My friend let me hold it in my hands, and tears came to my eyes as I leafed through it.

How did blood get on the pages of that Bible? When Bloody Mary ruled England, she terrorized Protestants, murdering as many as she could. Her soldiers would spill the person's blood, then take his Bible and dip it deep into the blood. A few of those Bibles have been preserved and are known as Martyrs' Bibles. Scientists have tested the paper and confirmed that the dark stains on every page of my friend's Bible are human blood.

I examined that Bible carefully, page by page. I could see where it was well worn from being studied. There are water stains, as if from tears, and places where a thumb had frayed favorite pages. This was someone's most valuable possession, and his or her blood is there to prove it.

In sad contrast, however, contemporary Christians tend to take their Bibles for granted, forgetting that many have given their lives just to own one copy. If the church today placed as high a value on God's Word as those martyrs did, perhaps there would not be so many people running off to experts in human theory and seeking counsel other than the perfect wisdom God gives us in His Word.

I am convinced that many who submit to various kinds of extrabiblical therapy do so precisely because they are looking for a way of solving their problems without surrendering to what they know God's Word requires of them.

Scripture has not failed them—they have failed Scripture. Many have never learned to let the Word of Christ richly dwell within them, as Paul instructs in Col 3:16. They have treated Scripture in a cursory way and never plumbed its depths. Their sinful neglect inevitably bears the fruit of doctrinal confusion and spiritual impotence. Because they never disciplined themselves to live according to biblical principles, they are now abandoning Scripture for worldly alternatives. They turn to

psychoanalysis to solve their problems, to science to explain the origin of life, to philosophy to explain the meaning of life, and to sociology to explain why they sin. Churches, schools, and seminaries have thus made themselves vulnerable to the influence of such teachings.

In Ps 19:11 David concludes his hymn on the sufficiency of Scripture: "Moreover, by [Thy judgments] Thy servant is warned; / In keeping them there is great reward." The warnings of Scripture help to protect against temptation, sin, error, foolishness, false teachers, and every other threat to our spiritual well-being. And to heed those warnings brings great reward. It is not a material prize; the Hebrew word for "reward" speaks of a spiritual blessing, not temporal riches. It is the settled joy and rest that come to those who live by God's Word.

There is no substitute for submission to Scripture. Your spiritual health depends on placing the utmost value on the Word of God and obeying it with an eager heart. If you think you can find answers to your spiritual problems through human counsel or worldly wisdom, you are forfeiting the most valuable and only reliable source of answers to the human dilemma. Do not relinquish the sweet, satisfying riches of God's Word for the bitter gall of this world's folly.

David ended this psalm by praying, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart / Be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer" (v. 14). How can we be assured of having such acceptable thoughts and meditations? Joshua 1:8 gives us the answer and the results: "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success."

The sufficiency of Scripture can be simply defined as follows: In the Bible alone God has given humanity all things that are necessary for the proper understanding of who He is, who we are, how He has acted in the past and what He expects from us. The basic idea behind the sufficiency of Scripture is that nothing else needs to be revealed to humanity about God or His plan for the human race. The Bible is the record of all of the things that God thought humanity needed to know about Him. In other words, Scripture is complete and sufficient for belief and behavior. Nothing needs to be added to it. The sufficiency of Scripture does not mean that the Scripture is all we need to live obediently. To be obedient in the sciences we need to read science and study nature. To be obedient in economics we need to read economics and observe the world of business. The sufficiency of Scripture means that we don't need any more special revelation. We don't need any more inspired, inerrant words. In the Bible God has given us, we have the perfect standard for judging all other knowledge.