

# Reflections

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## Rock-Bottom Reality

**I**n his 1958 book *Reflections on the Psalms*, in a chapter titled "Sweeter Than Honey," C.S. Lewis considers what the Psalms say about the Law of God. Among other things, he considers Psalm 119, "the Psalm specially devoted to the Law,"<sup>1</sup> and compares the good and true way of God versus rival ways of life. An excerpt follows.

But there is something else to our purpose in [Psalm 119]. On three occasions the poet asserts that the Law is "true" or "the truth" (86, 138, 142). We find the same in [Psalm] 111,7, "all his commandments are true". (The word, I understand, could also be translated "faithful", or "sound"; what is, in the Hebrew sense, "true" is what "holds water", what doesn't "give way" or collapse.)... I think we all see pretty well what the Psalmists mean. They mean that in the Law you find the "real" or "correct" or stable, well-grounded, directions for living. The Law answers the question "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?" (119, 9). It is like a lamp, a guide (105). There are many rival directions for living, as the Pagan cultures all round us show. When the poets call the directions or "rulings" of Jaweh

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"true" they are expressing the assurance that these, and not those others, are the "real" or "valid" or unassailable ones; that they are based on the very nature of things and the very nature of God....

[The Jews] know that the Lord (not merely obedience to the Lord) is "righteous" and commands "righteousness" because He loves it (11, 8). He enjoins what is good because it is good, because He is good. Hence His laws have *emeth*, "truth", intrinsic validity, rock-bottom reality, being rooted in His own nature, and are therefore as solid as that Nature which He has created. But the Psalmists themselves can say it best; "thy righteousness standeth like the strong mountains, thy judgements are like the great deep" (36, 6). Their delight in the Law is a delight in having touched firmness; like the pedestrian's delight in feeling the hard road beneath his feet after a false short cut has long entangled him in muddy fields.

For there were other roads, which lacked "truth". The Jews had as their immediate neighbours, close to them in race as well as in position, Pagans of the worst kind... That background made the "beauty" or "sweetness" of the Law more visible; not least because these neighbouring Paganisms were a constant temptation to the

Jew and may in some of their externals have been not unlike his own religion... But when a Jew ... looked at those worships — when he thought of sacred prostitution, sacred sodomy, and the babies thrown into the fire for Moloch — his own "Law" as he turned back to it must have shone with an extraordinary radiance. Sweeter than honey; or if that metaphor does not suit us who have not such a sweet tooth as all ancient peoples (partly because we have plenty of sugar), let us say like mountain water, like fresh air after a dungeon, like sanity after a nightmare...<sup>2</sup>

In the final paragraph of the chapter, Lewis observed that "[i]n so far as this idea of the Law's beauty, sweetness, or preciousness, arose from the contrast of the surrounding Paganisms, we may soon find occasion to recover it. Christians increasingly live on a spiritual island; new and rival ways of life surround it in all directions and their tides come further up the beach every time."<sup>3</sup> Let us be thankful that wherever our culture goes, we can depend on the truth of Holy Scripture.



"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

PSALM 119:105 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (A Harvest Book/Harcourt, Inc.), p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-63.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

